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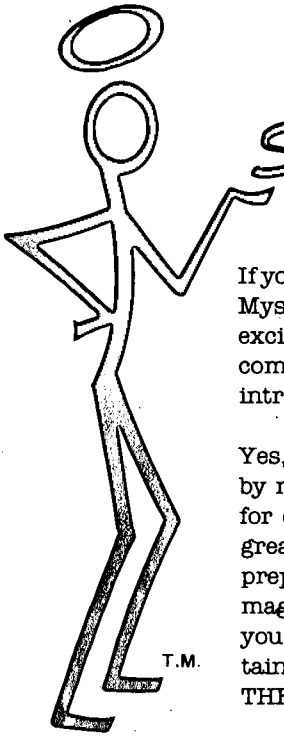

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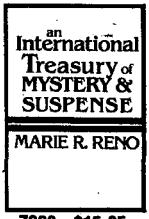

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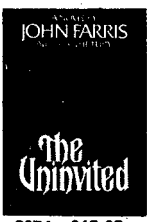

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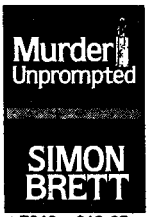

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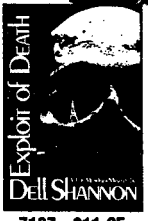

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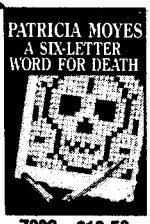

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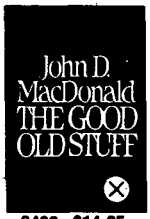

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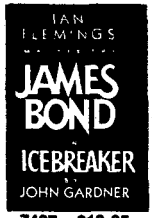

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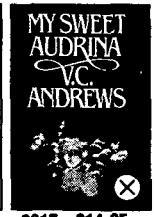

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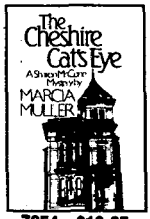

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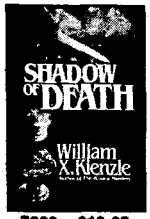

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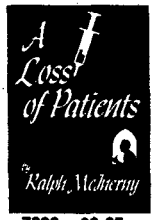

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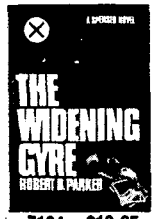

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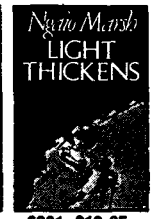

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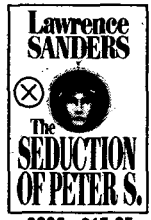

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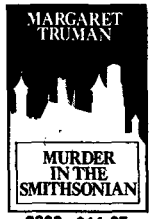

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a ***NEW*** **short story by**

GREGORY MCDONALD

"Where is Chago now?" the Chief asked 'ta.

"He went to Quito, Chief. On his motor bicycle. To learn how to go about getting National Identity Cards for himself and my family, so we can vote in the next election."

The Chief smiled over his teacup. "For whom would you vote?"

'ta sucked the corn kernel in his mouth. "That is yet to be decided, sir."

Gregory Mcdonald, former member of the Peace Corps and later Arts and Humanities editor and Critic-at-Large columnist for The Boston Globe, *has won two Edgars from the Mystery Writers of America for his novels about investigative reporter Irwin Maurice Fletcher, familiarly known as Fletch. Fletch's adversary, Inspector Francis Xavier Flynn, became popular enough to warrant several books of his own. This is Gregory Mcdonald's first short story published in English and first short story published in the United States. It was written after a hiking trip he and his wife Susan took last summer in Ecuador and Peru.*

"I fell entirely in love," he wrote us, "with one group of Indians in particular, the Otavalos. Only a little more than three feet tall, they have such dignity. The strong-boned faces of the women are handsome in apparent serenity.

"It has always," he added, "been very hard, but I think it is becoming a little easier now to publish things in this country about South America." The new Fletch novel, Carioca Fletch, *which takes place in Brazil and is just about due for publication by Warner Books, will be, he says, "an interesting experiment." If it is anything like Gregory Mcdonald's previous books and the story that follows, it will be* very *interesting—period . . .*

"Q"

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THE ROBBERY

by GREGORY MCDONALD

The Chief decided he would express his authority, permit the people, even the people he could not see, time to adjust to the presence of his authority, think through to a passive conclusion what his being there meant, while he ate his two ham-and-cheese sandwiches and drank his thermos of coffee with milk in the enclosed Jeep.

It had begun to rain lightly even before he left the black-top road and began, slowly, to climb the rocky track in the Jeep. When he was where he wanted to be on the track, across the narrow, deep river from 'ta's house, he had parked the Jeep facing the river, in the shade of the trees when the sun would come out.

At the other end of the footbridge, 'ta's wife, bent over, baby enshawled on her back, bare feet clinging to the wet stones better than any hands could, beat clothes clean with a flat wooden ladle against the stones. Another grandchild, about four years old, danced slowly around her.

Indians do not notice the rain. It does not make them shelter. It does not make them walk any more swiftly than they walk naturally. Chewing his sandwich, the Chief thought of his son, Juan Carlos. The boy had taken to wearing a scarf at night. Two nights before, the Chief had seen Juan Carlos leaving the high-school library after dark, his scarf wrapped around his nose and mouth in the affected belief in the evil inherent in night air.

With her ladle, 'ta's wife beat white trousers against a stone in the river. Otavalo men wear white trousers with their blue ponchos, brown sandals, and brown-felt hats, and the white trousers are never seen to be dirty or wrinkled, even after a rain. The women wash as many as six pairs of white trousers for their husbands a day. Now 'ta's wife pulled the shirt off the dancing four-year-old and washed that. While the Chief lunched in the Jeep, she removed the child's pants and washed them in the river, then the child's underpants and washed them in the river, and then washed the naked child in the river in the rain. She and the child had not tried to conceal

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seeing the Jeep. It was blue. In three places on the Jeep, *Policia* was painted in white. They had looked up at the Jeep several times. By now, the Chief was sure, 'ta's wife would have concluded what would be the result of the Chief's being there.

'ta appeared on the footbridge this side of the river. He must have taken a shortcut down a gulley from the track to the bridge. It does not take a gulley of much depth to conceal an Otavalo.

Across the footbridge, fifty meters upstream behind the trees, was 'ta's house and, in the same clearing, the house of his son, Santiago. And ten kilometers up the crevasse between the mountains behind the houses was where the airplane carrying the German film crew had crashed in the fog nineteen months before.

At the other end of the footbridge, 'ta spoke with his wife. The naked grandson pointed to the Jeep. Both 'ta and his wife looked frankly across and up at the Jeep.

Then 'ta went on the path to his house.

The Chief capped his thermos. A quarter of his coffee with milk was left. He would want it later. He sat another ten minutes, smoking a cigarette, permitting 'ta to feel the Chief's authority, to reason the outcome of his being there. He hoped it would stop raining. He realized the noises his wife would make when he returned with his shirt wet and his khaki trousers muddied. Leaning around the Jeep's steering wheel, he tucked the cuffs of his trousers into his boots.

It still rained as he walked across the footbridge. The child's eyes shifted back and forth between the Chief's holstered pistol and his Cotacachi boots.

"Good afternoon." The Chief placed his hand on the child's head.

"Good afternoon, sir." 'ta's wife's wooden washing bowl was almost full of clean, wet clothes. "Chief."

The path upstream was muddy. The Chief's wife would run the General Electric washing and drying machines while he wanted to eat his dinner in peace, to annoy him with the noise, to communicate with him what her life was like.

In the house clearing, 'ta was by the fireplace, pouring aromatic tea, cedron, into a second cup.

"Good afternoon," the Chief said.

"Good afternoon, Chief." 'ta handed him the heavy, cracked cup of tea. "Would you rather coffee?"

"This is fine."

There was no real place to sit in the house clearing. Around the

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cooking fireplace, hens scratched in the volcanic ash. Beyond the cactus fence were five cows. A fat sow with sucklings lay against the side wall of 'ta's little house. At a senseless angle to the clearing was Santiago's house. Barefooted, his wife sat on a stone, hunched over a magazine in her lap to keep it dry while she read it. Inside her house a radio played Argentine music, and Ecuadorian commercials for Japanese cars. The family's life happened outdoors, in the clearing. The small houses were used only for sleeping and for storing certain perishables. The mountain nights, from 18:30 sunset to 6:30 sunrise the year round on the equator were freezing at more than three thousand meters.

"Now you have five cows," the Chief said.

"Yes, sir."

The Chief sipped his tea. "I heard about the pig." A year ago he was certain it was the Busco family with their four sons who were guilty. He had even put the first son in jail for a month on a minor infraction. While 'ta quietly had been buying this sow. A month is a long time in an Ecuadorian jail. As food is not provided, family or friends must bring food to the jailed one, see the conditions, share in the disgrace. Usually the family will tell the police anything the jailed one might have forgotten to mention.

"Now the sow has four piglets," the Chief said.

"Yes, sir. She has done well."

'ta's wife, the one grandchild wrapped on her back, the other, still naked, stepping lightly behind her, carried the wooden bowl of wet wash up from the river.

"'ta, did I hear you were asking about buying a bull?" the Chief asked.

'ta was only as old as the Chief, in his late thirties, but had enough lines in his face for twice that age. He shifted the corn kernel in his mouth before speaking. "I did ask about a bull."

In the clearing, 'ta's wife and the daughter-in-law were hanging the clothes in the rain.

The Chief took a long drink of the cedron before saying, "And I have seen Chago riding the lemons into town on a Honda."

"It is a good way to transport the lemons, sir. Chago says he is safe carrying the lemons on the motor bicycle. It is better than our carrying them while walking. He is not gone from home so long."

The Chief let 'ta listen to his own garrulousness. They were not talking about transporting lemons. They were talking about 'ta's son, Santiago, having bought a Honda motorcycle. The Chief had

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also watched Chago, bottle of Club beer in hand, showing off the motorcycle after market was over.

Finally, the Chief looked west, up into the tops of the trees. "That is where the airplane crashed. Carrying the German film crew."

'ta said nothing. It was doubtful he understood much about Germans, or film crews, despite having found their bodies. At least, none of their papers or their film equipment had been taken. Probably he had never seen deutschemarks before, but he knew paper money when he saw it, and the German film crew had been known to be carrying thousands of deutschemarks when the plane crashed, and the deutschemarks had been taken.

"Where is Chago now?" the Chief asked.

"He went to Quito, Chief. On his motor bicycle. To learn how to go about getting National Identity Cards for himself and my family, so we can vote in the next election."

The Chief smiled over his teacup. "For whom would you vote?"

'ta sucked the corn kernel. "That is yet to be decided, sir."

At first, of course, the Commandant thought the Chief had recovered the money. Officially, the Chief described how the fog had delayed his getting to the plane crash. By the time he arrived, he said, the Indians had come and gone, disturbing nothing but obviously taking the money. Clearly, the Commandant doubted him, and for a while it was being mentioned that Ortez might soon be Chief. The next time the Commandant visited, the Chief purposely drank too much with him and convinced him that he had not recovered the money, and although he had watched the Indians closely—particularly the Busco family, who lived closest to the plane crash, had four sons, and had since bought wire fencing from Idealco—he had never succeeded in recovering the money. Red-eyed the next morning, the Commandant agreed the Chief would lose too much by withholding the money if he *had* recovered it and there was no more talk of Ortez being made Chief.

The Chief put his empty teacup on the edge of the stone fireplace. "You robbed from the dead, 'ta."

'ta's mild brown eyes looked into the Chief's.

Hands behind his back, the Chief took a step this way, a step that way. He knew 'ta could not fail to submit to him. The authority of the military police is firmly established, has been deeply engrained in all the people.

Every thirty kilometers, more or less, on every road, the military police, carrying semi-automatics, stop every car and truck and check

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licenses. They have the unquestioned right to question and search everyone and everything. They say it is to make sure no one is driving drunk or without a license. They say it is to discover aliens, particularly Colombians seeking work. They say it is to look for contraband, guns, and drugs. Even the most intelligent people believe all this, or say they do. But rarely is anyone ever found with contraband or guns, or without a license or driving drunk. Andean Indians know national boundaries do not affect where the moon rises or sets. Enough drugs grow naturally in Ecuador so that transporting them from here to there is something only tourists do. It is liquor the Indians use to adjust to overwhelming progress—or not adjust to it, depending on the character. Sometimes they use it to dance in front of a heavy, speeding truck, to be crushed beneath it, to express in that one moment the realization of what is happening to them. And liquor is available without restraint.

No, the Chief knew the truth. It is essential the people believe in the omnipresence of the military police. When, after a few years, constitutional democracy is seen not to be working again—or yet—the military police must be trusted to take over the government. And after a few years, when military government is seen not to be working again, the military police must be trusted to support the establishment of constitutional democracy again. Such is the way of government in Latin America, as predicted accurately by The Liberator, Simon Bolivar.

The authority of the uniform is pervasive and ultimate.

"You stole from the dead," the Chief repeated into the submissive eyes.

Without a word, 'ta went into his house.

The Chief looked down his trousers. Mud had adhered to his pantlegs above his boots. He marveled at the things of life. He had drunk hot tea standing in the rain. Across the clearing two women hung wash in the rain. He smiled. Maybe mud on his trousers was his way of communicating with his wife what *his* life was like.

'ta came out of the little house and directly handed the Chief a stack of foreign bills. There was an elastic around them.

Slowly, carefully, the Chief counted the bills. He had never seen deutschemarks before, either. He counted them twice.

Then he said, "'ta, the Commandant knows exactly how much money the Germans were carrying."

"The sow," 'ta said. "I had two cows, and bought three. And the motor bicycle for Chago, to bring the lemons to market."

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"Not good enough, 'ta."

"Would you take all that? It is spent."

The Chief considered it. "No, 'ta. All right. That money is spent."

"What, then?"

"The rest of the money, 'ta."

"You believe there is more?"

"The Commandant knows exactly how much is missing, 'ta. What can I do?"

For a moment, they stood there. The rain stopped. Soon 'ta would want to change to fresh trousers.

"Come with me," he said.

In the little house, 'ta lifted his pallet bed. Under it, one brick was in the earthen floor. Underneath the brick was a cellophane packet. In the packet were a third again as many deutschemarks.

"All right." The Chief put all the bills into the cellophane packet and put the packet in his pocket.

In the clearing in front of the house, again he said, "All right."

"Chief," 'ta said. "Thank you for not making trouble about all this."

"All right," the Chief said.

They shook hands.

Chago was walking the motorcycle over the footbridge in the sunlight.

"Hi, Chago," the Chief said.

Chago adjusted very quickly to the meaning of the Chief's being there. In the bright sunlight he could see the packet of bills in the Chief's pocket.

"I could hide this motorcycle in the woods," Chago said. "You could never find it."

"And you could never use it again," the Chief answered.

"Clearly," Chago said.

The Chief looked off the footbridge into the river well below. He supposed that to Juan Carlos a motorcycle would be even more dangerous than the night air. Finally, he said to Chago, "That money is spent."

"Clearly," Chago said.

The Chief walked on, leaving Chago and his motorcycle on the footbridge.

"Thank you for not making trouble about all this," Chago called after him . . .

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After the cedron, the Chief decided he did not yet want the rest of his thermos of coffee with milk. He would have it after he had put the money in the little box in his locker at The Fountain of Youth Health Club. He didn't know the value of deutschemarks in sucres, the value of the money in his pocket, but he was sure it was enough to begin buying the farm of ten hectares his wife's uncle wanted to sell near Ibarra. The thought thrilled him. Even more thrilling was the thought that next year he could afford to send Juan Carlos to the university in Quito to study the science of economics. The Chief had read in *El Commercio* how important the science of economics was to be to the future of Latin America.

Starting the Jeep, he chuckled. And the Commandant had believed him and now would not be looking for his *yapa,* his share of the recovered money.

When Chago walked his motorcycle into the house clearing, 'ta was at the fireplace rinsing a cup with boiling water.

"Did he get it all?" Chago asked.

"Half."

"After almost two years," Chago said, "we thought it would be safe to buy the motorcycle."

"He said we robbed the dead."

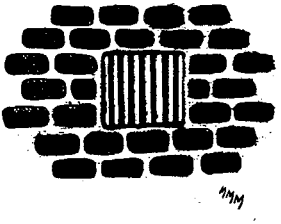
"He just robbed the living."

"The cows are living." 'ta walked toward the gate in the cactus fence. "We must take their milk from them."

It was early to milk the cows.

"Wait," Chago said. "Don't you want to learn how we get National Identity Cards, to vote in the election?"

Still walking toward the gate, softly 'ta said: "No."



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a *NEW* short story by

JEAN DARLING

The tour of The Brownstone impressed on Loretta how she no longer belonged. —Belonged like when it had been her turn to get up first in the morning to make the coffee in the small kitchen with which each floor was equipped. Belonged like the nights when those who were at home did each other's hair, sitting cross-legged on the floor in a circle, each working on the head of the girl in front of her, making pin-curls or winding locks of hair onto metal curlers. Belonged like waiting in line to use the practice rooms, or being bawled out by Sadie for wearing makeup that looked as if it had been applied with a trowel. Or checking out the latest casting news chalked on the callboard by the dining room. That callboard had made her feel as if she was finally part of a family . . .

Jean Darling, writing about a time and place she knew very well from inside—postwar Broadway. Welcome to Sadie Gold's brownstone residence for aspiring young actresses . . .

TWO OF A KIND

by JEAN DARLING

Sitting in the large, cluttered room, a rapidly cooling cup of tea in her hands, Loretta Grant felt inadequate. The questions being put to her by the thirty aspiring young actresses gathered around were the same questions she and her peers had asked at similar gatherings held by Sadie Gold at her boarding house for theatrical women long before Loretta's name had reached a marquee, long before she herself had become a star and had herself been invited

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to be Sadie's Sunday Celebrity. Now it was *her* impossible task to supply a foolproof recipe for stardom in the year of Our Lord 1953.

The invitation had been hand-delivered to her at the theater just before the Wednesday matinee. At first the flush of triumph she had felt threatened the pancake pallor she affected to complement her generous mouth and the violet eyes she enlarged with great fans of false lashes. It had taken almost seven years to win this acknowledgment of her success from Sadie. But by the time the final curtain came down on the afternoon performance, Loretta had decided against accepting the invitation. Returning to The Brownstone, as Sadie's was called by all who had rented rooms there waiting for their big break, would resurrect memories of the very thing she had tried so hard to forget. The accident in Boston.

It had happened the day after Penny Roche, her roommate at Sadie's, became the understudy for the part of Ado Annie in the road show of *Oklahoma,* in which both Penny and Loretta sang in the chorus. Both girls had auditioned when the singer who had been understudying the role decided to leave the company to get married. When Penny was told she had the job, she was miserable because she knew how much Loretta wanted it. Had the decision to audition in the first place been hers instead of the stage manager's, she would have refused.

"I'm so sorry, Loretta," she apologized. "If I could, I'd—"

"Don't be silly," Loretta said, carefully holding her disappointment in check. "I'm glad you got it. It doesn't matter—something else will come along for me." But it did matter. It mattered so much that the very next night, when an opportunity to rectify the situation presented itself, the temper the nuns at Terre Haute had tried so hard to curb flared out of control.

They were the last of the chorus hurrying down from making a quick change. Penny was ahead, her hands hooking up her bodice in back as she ran. A sudden rage-driven impulse thrust Loretta's palm sharply against her friend's back. Penny lurched forward and tumbled headlong to the bottom of the circular wrought-iron stairs. As quickly as the anger had come it was gone, but by the time Loretta's cries for help were answered Penny was unconscious and dying, her neck broken.

At the coroner's inquest, Loretta tearfully said she had tripped and fallen against Penny, thus precipitating her tragic fall. Her tears were genuine even if her story was not. The verdict returned

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was Death by Misadventure and Penny was laid to rest in a Boston cemetery. There had been no relatives at the small service. Penny's parents were both dead and her only brother, Bill, was listed as missing on a bombing raid over Ploeste in 1944.

Shortly after Penny's death, the show moved to Cleveland, then to Pittsburgh, where the actress who played Ado Annie was rushed to a hospital for an emergency appendectomy. Loretta, now her understudy, went on in her place and when the actress did not return, her recovery slowed down by peritonitis, Loretta took over the role of the girl would couldn't say no for eight months, playing to the balcony each and every performance. She was a great crowd pleaser. Her career had begun.

Just because Sadie Gold had invited her to The Brownstone was no reason she had to go. It would be easy enough to plead a previous engagement. But somehow Sunday afternoon found Sadie welcoming her out of the chill April wet into the house on West Forty-sixth Street.

After introductions had been made and the usual finger-fare passed around with tea, the young women settled themselves in chairs, on cushions on the floor, anywhere a flat surface could be found, and the questions began.

Answering truthfully for the most part, Loretta told how at sixteen she had run away from the Terre Haute orphanage, fired with ambition to be a Broadway star. She listed her credits on the way up the ladder and agreed it had been helpful to be seen in all the right places, like the Stork Club and Versailles. She named William Herman as her singing teacher and stressed the importance of being ready for any break that came. Several girls asked her about a rich admirer she was rumored to have, but she denied it. Asked about other men in her life, she said nothing about her brief marriage to Paul Kramer, a young actor who, as a Naval lieutenant, had died in the Battle of Midway. She had never told anyone but Penny about that—not even Sadie. Death was disturbing. It had haunted her all her life, when all she wanted was gaiety and a place in the sun.

The questions came thick and fast. Then, just when Loretta started to think they would never end, the girls quietly began to slip away, leaving Loretta and Sadie alone in the familiar memento-filled room.

"I'm sure you could use a drink after that," Sadie said, going to the sideboard and pouring herself a gin and tonic. "What'll it be?"

"Nothing, thanks," Loretta told her. "I'm dieting as usual."

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Sadie sighed. "I've given up. There doesn't seem much point in it at my age."

Loretta frowned. "The questions the girls asked—was I ever that naïve?"

Sadie sat in the overstuffed chair opposite her. "No. You were always wise beyond your years. What the astrologer Evangeline Adams called 'an old soul.' "

"Why wouldn't I be? There was nothing I didn't do to get to New York and stay afloat until you had space to take me in. And then when I came back off the road, you didn't have room for me any more."

"Of course not. You'd been here longer than most when you went on tour with *Oklahoma*. This residence is mostly for the struggling young ones—and a few on the way down. There's always a long waiting list."

"But if Penny had wanted back instead of me, you'd have taken her."

Sadie nodded. "Probably. But Penny was an innocent, far too soft for show business. I tried to protect her. I didn't like the idea of her going on the road so early—I had a premonition."

Loretta stared at Sadie, forcing her own eyes not to waver. Finally Sadie's gaze dropped and she changed the subject.

A depression set in after Loretta's visit to The Brownstone. Restless, dream-filled nights did little to dispel it. Undoubtedly, her nocturnal excursions into the past had been set in motion by Sadie's insistence that she take a tour of the old house. Nothing about it had changed. Sadie herself, despite the passage of time and a substantial gain of weight, still carried herself like the Ziegfeld showgirl she'd once been. The only real change Loretta had detected was how she herself no longer belonged.

Belonged like when it had been her turn to get up first in the morning to make the coffee in the small kitchen with which each floor of The Brownstone was equipped. Belonged like the nights when those who were at home did each other's hair, sitting cross-legged on the floor in a circle, each working on the head of the girl in front of her, making pin-curls or winding locks of hair onto metal curlers. Belonged like waiting in line to use the ironing room or the practice rooms, or exchanging bath times with someone who had an earlier or later call—or being bawled out by Sadie for wearing makeup that looked as if it had been applied with a trowel. Or

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checking out the latest casting news chalked on the callboard by the dining room. That callboard had made her feel so cared for, as if she was finally part of a family.

Although Loretta realized the futility of languishing over the past and knew her misery would eventually run its course, she was still unable to control her temper. She snapped at her leading man, kept up a running battle with the director, and fired her long-suffering dresser, Minna, regularly. True, she always hired her back almost immediately, but it didn't exactly make for "happy families." One night she slapped the male juvenile for muttering an obscenity when she brushed past him coming offstage while he was waiting in the wings to make his entrance. He went to Equity, demanding Loretta be brought up on charges.

"I'm used to temperamental stars," he complained, "but she's completely out of line. Maybe a few weeks' suspension will make her think twice about her behavior."

"He's right," the female ingenue agreed. "Every time I go up on my lines, she reminds me of it just before I go onstage."

"So don't blow your lines," the Equity deputy said. "Look, you two—Lorry has a temper, we all know that. She's manic. And she's being a little worse than usual. But if every prima donna brought up on charges before Equity was put on suspension, practically every theater on Broadway would be dark. Be patient. She'll come out of it—she always has."

Never well liked by her peers, Loretta was a bundle of contradictions. She knew it was foolish to trust people, yet she was vulnerable to a fault. Always a self-starter, she was a loner who yearned to belong. Thus her relationship with Ben Wilson and his E-Type Jag. That Ben was married somehow made things easier. There was no tie between them that could be broken, like when her parents died and her husband had been killed. There was nothing to set her heart on, nothing to worry about losing. Nothing more than his attentive company every now and then.

But even his occasional company eventually became a threat. Any day, Dorothy Kilgallen might start wondering in print which millionaire's E-Type Jaguar was so often seen waiting at the stage door of what big Broadway show for what young singing star? Even the know-nothings at The Brownstone had apparently been aware of it. That had made her very uncomfortable and had added to her post-

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Brownstone depression. Loretta was horrified by the idea of scandal. And so, after careful deliberation, she gave Ben his walking papers.

Which meant that Gerry Bloch was back doing the honors when she needed an escort.

Gerry was her accompanist. He was a pleasant young man, attractive and talented and always willing to help her out when she asked. But then, she reminded herself, playing piano for Loretta Grant not only kept him going while he studied at Julliard under the G.I. Bill, it automatically opened doors for him that would not otherwise be accessible.

And she enjoyed him. She felt as if she'd known him a long time—or, more accurately, as if he had known her a long time. He had certainly followed her career from the beginning and she had finally hired him because she was flattered by the fact that he wouldn't take no for an answer. Kind of an Ado Annie in reverse.

There was nothing unusual about it on the outside—just a plain white envelope with Loretta's name and the address of the theater typed on it. The postmark was New York City and the stamp was undistinguished. The contents were not.

HOW CAN YOU FACE YOURSELF IN THE MIRROR? was typed in red across the center of an unlined white index card.

"Minna!"

Loretta's dresser was hanging up Loretta's street clothes. She observed Loretta's expression in the mirror and, seeing the stridency in her tone wasn't directed at her, she hurried to her side.

"What do you make of this?" Loretta asked her.

Minna took reading glasses from the pocket of her smock and read the message. "Beats me," she said truthfully. "It's some kind of joke. Nobody would mind looking in the mirror if they had a face like yours." Sycophancy was one of Minna's strong points.

The next evening brought another envelope identical to the first in every way except for the postmark. The message inside read:

HOW CAN YOU LIVE WITH YOURSELF?

"Maybe it's some kind of advertising campaign," Minna ventured. "For cold cream or something. Remember that sign in Times Square they added more words to every day? I don't remember what it was selling, but it sure drew the crowds."

When the third envelope arrived, Loretta threw it unopened into the wastebasket. But curiosity won out, and a few minutes later she retrieved the envelope and slit it open with a nail file.

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HAVE YOU NO CONSCIENCE? leaped out at her in the same red letters. As though scalded, she dropped it into a box of unanswered fan mail at the other side of her dressing table. So much for Minna's theory. This was no advertising gimmick. This was some crazy who got a kick out of sending poisonous letters to celebrities.

Wrapping herself in her blue-moire robe and pulling her hair back in a towel, Loretta smoothed greasepaint over her face with firm, smooth strokes. With an M-G-M screen test in the offing and The Theatre Guild beckoning to her about a new musical, she couldn't afford to allow anything as stupid as crank mail get to her. The world was full of cranks. But why she had struck this one's fancy bothered her. There were no more skeletons in her closet than in anyone else's—especially now that Ben Wilson had moved his Jag to a stage door six blocks farther uptown.

Then a week passed without a fourth message and Loretta decided that whoever had sent the first three had moved on to another target. A good thing, too. She had agreed to appear on the Ed Sullivan Show and any added anxiety could sabotage it.

Her performance on the Sullivan Show was a rousing success and she arrived at her dressing room the following evening feeling radiant and on top of the world. The last thing she expected to see was the familiar white envelope with the rest of her mail.

The message consisted of a single word in the center of the card, this time hand-printed in red ink:

YOU

The following evening brought another single word:

ARE

Loretta didn't show the new messages to Minna. There was something shameful in receiving them, and besides, for all she knew Minna was in on the plot.

Why she didn't throw them away, she didn't know.

On Wednesday the card read:

NOT

Thursday, Friday, and Saturday came and went with no continuation of the message. Loretta felt a foreboding this time. She found herself looking at the rest of the cast with suspicion, eyeing them from beneath lowered lashes in the hope of catching someone off guard. The orchestra didn't escape her suspicion, nor did the stage hands or the house staff. Anyone, including Minna, alone or with

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others, could be doing this for their own petty reasons or simply out of boredom.

On Monday, Loretta arrived at the theater to find two envelopes lying together like loving conspirators. One was postmarked the previous Thursday, the other Friday. When she tore the envelopes open in chronological order they read:

FIT TO
LIVE

Placing the two cards carefully to the side on her dressing table, she applied her makeup and dressed without conscious thought. Waiting to go onstage for the opening number, she toyed with the idea of calling the police after the show. But during intermission she decided they could do nothing. The message wasn't a blackmail demand and it made no actual threat on her life. Until there was a more overt move, the police were helpless. She was helpless.

A week passed, then two, with no further messages. Still, Loretta dreaded going to the theater more and more every day. Sometimes she barely made her first entrance on cue. She was distracted and barely answered when she was spoken to. She imagined a smirk on every face she encountered onstage and off. Only the now mechanical interaction with the audience kept her going. Her usually healthy appetite and sleep habits suffered and she grew painfully thin—a state that would ordinarily have delighted her. She searched her memory for a clue to whoever might want to destroy her peace of mind—and saw that list grow monumental, from the people she had angered in this present show and in her personal life in recent years back to those she had stung personally and professionally in the past. She could not list, of course, that unknown quantity—the simple begrudgers of success and strangers or acquaintances whose motives she couldn't begin to fathom.

After the show on the Saturday of the second week, she gathered the envelopes together and took them home. Inside her apartment, she poured herself a drink, then spread the cards on the living-room floor and reread them.

HOW CAN YOU FACE YOURSELF IN THE MIRROR?
HOW CAN YOU LIVE WITH YOURSELF?
HAVE YOU NO CONSCIENCE?
YOU ARE NOT FIT TO LIVE

She turned on the television set and sat before it. Although she

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refreshed her drink as she became aware that the glass was empty, she neither ate nor slept and the ringing of the phone went unanswered until Monday morning when, still in the clothes she'd worn home from the theater on Saturday, she was stirred from her squirrel-cage ponderings by the insistent ringing of the doorbell.

It was Gerry Bloch arriving for their practice session. She was ready for him. She had narrowed her wide selection of suspects down to one.

"Hi," he said, heading like a lemming for the piano. "I've been trying to reach you but you've been out. This new arrangement of 'Little Girl Blue' is tricky but you'll love it." He lifted the piano lid and ran his fingers nimbly up the scale of C. Loretta moved to the window and stood looking balefully down at the street below.

"Say when," Gerry prompted her, aware that she was waiting for something from him.

In answer Loretta said, "What's your real name? I'll bet my life it isn't Gerry Bloch."

He stared at her. "What are you talking about, Lorry?"

"You saw action in the war. Where were you stationed?"

"I was in Italy. My name really *is* Gerry Bloch, Lorry—"

"Italy. I knew it. You were with the Air Corps, weren't you? And you went missing. Penny told me about you. Then when you came back, she was dead. You're her brother Bill." She had come away from the window and was leaning across the piano, her face close to his. "You're her goddamned brother Bill!"

"I'm nobody's brother, Lorry—I'm an only child. Come on, what's eating you? You look like hell. I spent most of the war in Naples as a hospital orderly—not in the Air Corps, just plain Army. I never flew a plane and I never went missing."

"Sure you didn't." She stared at him, then went to the table beside the armchair facing the TV, scooped up the index cards where they now lay, and threw them at him. "These are what are eating me, *Bill!* These love notes! And your easy lies, *Bill!* —Take Lorry, for instance! How easily you've called me that from the beginning—as though you knew me by that name before we even met, before you came after me for a job! You *did* come after *me,* remember? You hung around and hung around and insinuated yourself into my life. I was sorry for you, and—I admit it—I was flattered by the fact that you wouldn't take no for an answer. You seduced me into hiring

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you. I saw it, but I didn't mind. I know how hard it is to get ahead in this business. But for you to actually impersonate someone else—"

"You don't have a very high opinion of yourself," Gerry said. "I wanted to work with you because I love your style, I love your talent. I'm not a climber in the sense you mean—and I'm not impersonating anyone." He looked at the cards scattered on the rug and decided that distraction might save the day. It had worked before. He spread the accordianlike arrangement he had brought with him across the music desk of the piano and started to finger the melody.

The flippancy of the gesture snapped the fragile thread that had been holding Loretta's full rage in check. She slammed the lid of the piano down on his fingers with all her strength.

For a moment they were frozen in a tableau, Gerry Bloch's eyes shut against the blazing pain, Loretta stunned by what her ungovernable rage had once again inflicted.

She didn't stop running until she reached the house on Forty-sixth Street.

The old character actress who answered the door left Loretta in the living room while she went to find Sadie. Loretta watched her shuffle toward the back of the house. The woman had been in residence in Loretta's day, sorting mail, watering plants, answering the door, but Loretta couldn't remember her name. Perhaps she'd never known it. The woman was depressing. Loretta saw enough down-and-out women on the streets without wanting to make friends with one at Sadie's.

The minutes ticked by. The dark room had never given a proper measure of daylight, as if Sadie was dedicated to artificial lighting. Loretta paced. The rehearsal rooms were audibly in use, but there was no one in the expansive downstairs entry and front rooms. She tried to contain herself by studying the familiar photographs and posters on the walls, some of which dated back to the Nineteenth Century. Ada Isaacs Menken, Maxine Elliott, Mrs. Fiske, Fanny Davenport, Lillian Russell, Julia Marlowe, Ellen Terry, Constance Collier—

"Loretta." Sadie emerged from the back kitchen, wearing a beige chenille robe, a cup and saucer in her hands. She seemed to know instinctively that it wasn't a social visit.

"Let's go in here," she said, leading Loretta to her office, the most private room in the house . . .

"There's a psychiatrist I can recommend," Sadie said.

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"I want to go on tonight," Loretta told her.

"You have an understudy, don't you?"

Loretta glared at her. "Doesn't everyone?"

"How exactly did you leave this young man?"

"I told you! I left him at the piano—I left him sitting there!"

"He's probably managed to get help for himself by now if he needs it. You may not have hurt him as badly as you think."

"Why would you call a psychiatrist? Why don't you call the police?"

"Do you think I'd call the police on you, Loretta? If I ring your apartment and he's still there, he may not be able to pick up the phone. Let's go back over there together. It won't take me five minutes to get dressed."

"Oh, yes," Loretta said. "Oh, yes—" She could hear the hope in her voice and she wanted to believe in it, but she knew in her heart there was no real future for her now, and there never had been.

The doorman betrayed no unusual reaction when Loretta returned with Sadie. Maybe Gerry was all right, Loretta thought. Maybe he had left and he was all right. Her fingers shook so that she couldn't fit the key to the lock. Sadie took the keys from her and got the door open.

"Gerry?" Loretta called tentatively. She hurried to the living room, Sadie following behind. There was no one there. "Gerry!"

"In here." They followed the sound of his voice to the lavender-and-white bathroom, where he was sitting on the edge of the tub, soaking his bruised hands in blood-tinted water in the sink. He and Loretta stared at each other—another tableau.

Sadie stepped past Loretta and bent down to inspect Gerry's swollen fingers. "What do you think?" she asked him. "Is anything broken?" He tried to flex his fingers in the cold water.

"I don't know. I'll go for X-rays."

They'll ask him how it happened, Loretta thought. Scandal. It will be in the papers. My life is over. His hands will mend but my reputation won't. Her rage returned.

"*Why* have you done this to me?" she cried. "I've tried so hard to live my own life, not involve myself with anyone! Why did you have to send me those evil messages?"

Sadie, who had decided the messages Loretta told her about had probably been sent by the ingenues in the show who had received no satisfaction elsewhere, was astonished when Gerry said, "Because of Penny."

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"You *are* her brother Bill!"

"No, I'm not, Lorry. I never knew Bill. I met Penny at a party here in New York just before I joined the Army. Before I went overseas, Penny promised me that if she didn't make it in the theater after two years on her own, she'd talk about marriage. When she went on the road and her letters stopped coming after she was given the understudy role in *Oklahoma,* I figured that was that. Penny was too soft-hearted to write me a Dear John letter."

The room tilted. Gerry Bloch. No wonder his name had seemed so familiar to her from the first. Penny had told her about him and about their agreement. Penny telling her about it had been Loretta's reason for confiding in her about her secret marriage. Oh, dear God, Penny's insignificant little romance had simply not been important enough to remember.

"Then you did send Loretta those messages?" Sadie said.

Gerry frowned at his fingers, moving them stiffly in the water.

"But why? What did you hope to accomplish?"

"I wanted to get at the truth. When I returned to New York after the war and heard about Penny's death—on the very day she had written her last letter to me—I almost went crazy. I got thinking how Lorry was the only one with her on those stairs and how she eventually was Penny's replacement." He looked at Loretta. "You're right that I insinuated myself into your life. I did it purposely. I wanted to find out if I was crazy to think you could have pushed her, or if you were crazy enough to have pushed her. Watching you in action these past few years has been my answer." With his forearm he forced the cold-water faucet open to replenish some of the water that had drained out of the basin. "You're capable of doing anything to get your way. You're a psychopath. If I could nail you for Penny's death I would, but I can't. There were no witnesses."

"You send me vile messages through the mail and call me a psychopath!" Loretta shouted. "You came here this morning pretending to be my friend and you call me a psychopath!"

"What you both are," Sadie Gold said, "is infantile. You hate each other, with enough reason. What now? What do you propose to do about this terrible situation you've gotten yourselves into?" Loretta and Gerry avoided each other's eyes. "I don't imagine either of you want the police called in."

"Why not?" Gerry muttered.

"You haven't called them, have you?" Sadie asked. He shook his head. "That's what I thought. You don't want bad publicity any more

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than Loretta does. You're two of a kind and I'm about to go home and leave you to solve this problem together. I'll tell you what I think you should do and if you don't agree, write your own script."

She turned to Loretta. "I suggest you get Gerry to the emergency room at Roosevelt Hospital, the sooner the better, and with any story about how this happened you both care to agree on. I suggest you call in sick tonight and get some rest. You might be surprised to learn that giving your understudy a chance once in a while won't deprive you of your audience." She looked with concern from Loretta to Gerry Bloch, and was gone.

When the front door closed behind her, Loretta sat down and rested her head against the wall, her eyes shut. After a while, she said, "It beats jumping out the window."

Gerry said nothing.

Loretta sat up and studied his hands for the first time. "How could you possibly have hurt them in any other way?"

"I'm thinking about it," Gerry said.

"Then you're willing to go along with Sadie's advice?"

"If *you* are, yes—and if you stay out of the show as long as I have to while my hands are mending."

"*Oh*, no. They'll say I'm not adaptable, that I can't sing with anyone else."

"That's right, they will."

"That's blackmail." Loretta's eyes searched his. "You would have eaten Penny alive."

"I don't know. People change. I've changed in a way I might not have if I hadn't lost her."

"I can sing with any accompanist. You're asking me to live a lie."

"Isn't that what you've been doing for years? You're a terrific actress. You can carry it off."

She glared at him, then shut her eyes again. Indulging her anger had always made her life worse. She wouldn't be in this situation now if she had held herself in check this morning. After a few moments, she opened her eyes, reached for a clean towel, and placed it flat on his knees. "Here," she said, "rest your hands on this." She reached for a second towel and went to dry the tops of his fingers.

He looked at her with apprehension.

"Trust me," she said. "The sooner you get better, the sooner we can get back to work."

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a *NEW* Ed Gorgon story by

JON L. BREEN

When Jon L. Breen gave up reviewing books for The Jury Box this past year, he promised to put more time into his own writing, including short stories for EQMM. True to his word, we've received two stories from him since. This one is the first story about his baseball-umpire detective Ed Gorgon in over six years. Welcome back to the ballpark, Jon . . . !

INSTANT REPLAY

by JON L. BREEN

"You blew that one, Ed," says Bernie McIntosh.

I squint at the TV screen. No umpire will ever be quick to admit he blew a call, though I'd be lying if I said we never missed any. I think I'm a better umpire than average and more honest about my own abilities than average, too, but I don't want to admit I missed this one. Not even to a fellow ump who's been retired ten years.

"I don't think so, Bernie," I say.

"Ed Gorgon never missed one, huh?"

"I didn't say that, Bernie. But I don't think I missed this one."

"Watch it from another angle," Bernie says, switching the videotape recorder back on. And here comes the play again.

The New York player is running like a gazelle toward first. The Chicago first baseman fields the ball and flips it to the pitcher running to cover the base. They get there almost together. Ed Gorgon makes the out sign and the base runner is all over him.

"I guess you're right, Bernie," I say grudgingly. "I called it wrong."

"What'd I tell you, Ed?"

"Think I'm past it? Think I should retire?"

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"Hell, no. You don't blow half as many as these young kids do. They rush 'em now, Ed, just like they rush the young ballplayers. They don't get the seasoning we did in the minors. And they don't have the dedication we had, either."

The old man's lament. I remind myself to try never to get like that.

"But they have an advantage we never had, Ed." He pats the VTR on his TV set. "Video tape. Instant replays. The technology has been around for years, but the major sports have never gotten around to using it to help officials decide the close ones. It'll be a lot better and fairer when they do."

"How'd you like it if they'd done that in your day, Bernie?"

"Fine, if it'd been available. But it wasn't."

"You'd have eaten your chest protector if anyone had suggested it."

"Not if they'd shown me how good it was, Ed. I might have been dubious at first, just like you are. But when they showed me the evidence, I'd say, 'Well, I guess you're right.' "

"I doubt that somehow."

"Ed, since I retired I must have watched thousands of sports events on television. It's my one interest, I admit that—especially since Helen died. Then my son gave me this VTR for Christmas a couple of years ago and ever since then I've been recording all the close plays."

"You're supposed to use it for movies and things, Bernie, not for concocting stuff like this to embarrass your friends."

Bernie looks hurt. "Ed, that's not the point. That's not the point at all. We all blow 'em. Even I used to—once in a while. I'm retired now, but I want to do my bit to help clean up sports, all sports. It's very important to me, Ed, not to embarrass anyone but to clean up sports."

"I don't know if 'clean up' is the right term, Bernie. You're not implying sports officials aren't honest, are you?"

"No, no. Why would I do that? But there are different kinds of clean. I'm putting together some evidence to convince all the major-league sports commissioners of the necessity to use video tape to decide close plays. And to do that, I need the support of some of the best men who officiate the various sports. I've written a letter to send to all the commissioners, Ed, and I want you and some others to sign it with me."

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"And that's why you invited me here, Bernie? Not just for the golf?"

Now he looks a little sheepish. "You can play golf, Ed. I haven't played in years, with it right in my back yard. But I think Al Hookstra plays."

"The basketball ref? He's coming?"

"And Joe Malone."

I nod my head. "The football ref."

"I've invited Chester Valcour, too."

"Who the heck is Chester Valcour?"

"Racing steward."

"This is a damn conspiracy," I mutter.

For a while we just sit there in silence. I can't get too mad at Bernie. He was a good friend to me when I started umpiring some thirty years ago. And I know how hard he's taken the death of his wife. But it isn't healthy for a person to concentrate his interests so much. I can tell you the last thing I want to do in the off-season is sit around watching instant replays of my mistakes on somebody's TV set.

Bernie rattles around in a big old house just on the edge of the best golf course in the state. He owns the best private baseball museum I ever saw, at least in the hands of an umpire. Bats, balls, uniforms, masks, chest protectors, ball-and-strike indicators—all with some kind of historical significance, but for some reason not in Cooperstown. That's not easy for an umpire to do, you know. They don't often stop the game to give us the ball, because we just called our ten-thousandth third strike or our two-hundredth balk or dusted off home plate for the zillionth time or took the hundred-and-fiftieth hard shot to the mask. Bernie spent a lot of his time inviting ballplayers and managers and fellow umps to visit him—for the golf, of course—and then getting some kind of memento out of them for his museum.

It's pouring outside. I can see it slanting at a thirty-degree angle outside the window. I'm thinking it won't be much of a day for golf tomorrow.

"When will the others get here?" I say.

"Expected 'em by now. But the weather's slowing them down, I guess. Let's watch some more, Ed. Somebody else's mistakes, huh?"

He shows me an outfielder running in, diving, and trapping a ball, and the ump—one of the dreaded young guys—calling the runner out. Then we get a close play at home plate, with the runner called

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safe but clearly tagged by the catcher according to the TV camera. We get that one from four different angles. Then we see what Bernie calls a good low strike called a ball. I don't enjoy it any more than I did watching my own mistakes. So umpires are human—I admit it. But somebody has to have the say over what is ruled in a game, and if you keep stopping the action to look at video tape it'll all just get that much slower. Baseball is slow enough as it is. So is football, for that matter.

On and on come the goof-ups. It's an umpire's nightmare. Bernie must have every bad call to appear on a TV baseball game for the last two years. Then at least we change sports.

"Now look at Hookstra call this guy for goal-tending, Ed. The ball's still on its upward flight. You can see it clearly."

I grunt. It's not all that clear to me. You can gas all day about judgment calls.

"And look at Dawkins foul that guy, Ed. It's blatant! Blatant! But is there a call? No."

"No harm, no foul," I mumble.

"No harm? That guy'll be eating through a straw for a week."

The basketball blunders continue. Many of them are based on camera angle, though, and the TV camera's angle is not necessarily any better than the ref's. The baseball muffs are better chosen because Bernie happens to know baseball and can spot the howlers more consistently.

Football is promised next, but to my relief the other guests start to arrive.

The first is Al Hookstra. Mrs. Winters, Bernie's housekeeper, brings him in, relieved of his soggy raincoat but with his hair and lower pant legs soaking wet. Al is a little guy, as basketball refs tend to be. Bernie and I both tower over him, so you can imagine what he looks like alongside Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. He has the kind of pent-up nervous energy that suits him well in running up and down the court.

"A real pleasure, Ed," he says, shaking my hand with a viselike grip. "Always wanted to meet you. You're practically a legend."

I return comparable lies to him. We have more in common than you might think, because I used to referee college basketball and he used to do minor-league baseball. Lots of sports officials are versatile like that. It's clear to us both, however, that he's better suited for running back and forth and I'm better suited for seeing over and around big strike zones.

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"You'll have a drink, won't you, Al?" says Bernie.

"A cup of coffee would be swell. I don't drink anything alcoholic. Have to keep in shape."

"Ed, you'll have another?"

"Sure. Not that I'm out of shape, you understand." Umpires are ticklish on the subject of conditioning. During the strike a few years back, some of my colleagues criticized one of the substitute umpires for being overweight, but I must confess I notice a few pot bellies among my brethren-in-blue.

"How did you manage to get away in the middle of the season, Al?" I ask.

"Scheduling quirk. I don't have to work another game till Tuesday night in Detroit."

"Hoping for a weekend free of pondering close decisions, I guess," I say with an innocent air. I might as well make it as tough for Bernie to mount his hobby horse as I can.

At the same instant Mrs. Winters produces a cup of coffee for Al Hookstra, Bernie hands me a vodka and tonic and the doorbell rings. The housekeeper scurries off to usher in a trio of very wet people.

Joe Malone is a burly, friendly guy I've met before. His wife is a sour-looking redhead currently in a state of temper, though saying all the right things—in the wrong tone of voice—to her host. Chester Valcour is a slick-looking, dapper fellow, dressed to the nines where the rest of us are sloppy casual. It develops that the two cars pulled in together, because both Malone and Valcour were asking directions at the same service station and one followed the other to Bernie McIntosh's door. "Do you play golf?" I ask Mrs. Malone.

She rolls her eyes upward in exasperation. "No, it seems like a stupid game to me. Not as stupid as football, of course." She gives a little smirk as if she means that as a joke, and her husband guffaws to suggest he takes it that way.

I compliment Joe on his work on the Super Bowl, just played the Sunday before. The football season is over now except for the odd all-star game—and the equally odd off-season league—and so I'm not surprised to see a traveling ref with his wife in tow. If I were a married man, I don't think I'd dare travel without my wife in the off-season after having been away so much of the year. If I were married to Hazel Malone, though, I might try to find some excuse.

Now that we're all gathered, Mrs. Winters—a rare treasure, who seems to have replaced Bernie's Helen in all but one important way—serves us a nice dinner. It's a relief to get away from the VTR

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for a while. While Al Hookstra quaffs water, the rest of us put away a couple of very good bottles of wine. I think Mrs. Malone accounts for half a bottle on her own and gets mellower and mellower as the evening goes on.

After dinner, though, you can guess what the entertainment is. Bad official calls on the old VTR.

Hookstra doesn't hold back on expressing his disagreement over Bernie's alleged basketball blunders, but he does it with amazing good humor. It's a different matter, though, when Bernie starts in on the football howlers.

"See that, Joe?" Bernie exclaims over one of them. "He's a good foot short of a touchdown." Later: "There's a textbook example of clipping, and you guys didn't see it." And: "If that isn't offensive pass interference, I'm O. J. Simpson." Mrs. Malone seems to be greatly enjoying her husband's discomfiture.

Finally, Joe Malone jumps up and says, "Wait just a damn minute! You think I came here to be insulted? This isn't what I call the way to treat a guest in your home, McIntosh." He turns on his wife. "And as for you, you're turning into a sloppy drunk."

He goes on and on like that. Bernie seems a little stunned at his vehemence, and all the rest of us do our best to smooth the waters, assure Joe he isn't being singled out. Somehow we manage to restore a fragile civility to the gathering, but Bernie has sense enough to retire the VTR for the evening, and we don't get to see whatever it is he has to embarrass the racing steward with.

Earlier than I expect but later than I'd hoped, we troop upstairs to bed. The storm is still raging outside and it takes me a long time to drift off in a bed better suited to Al Hookstra's dimensions.

I'm awakened early in the morning—the storm over and the first suggestion of dawn visible through the curtains of my room—by a pounding on my door.

"Mr. Gorgon! Mr. Gorgon!" It's the housekeeper, Mrs. Winters, and her voice sounds strained. I have the impression I'm not being summoned to an early breakfast and when I see her face, I know for sure something awful has happened.

She leads me downstairs to the museum, still dressed in her bathrobe. Bernie McIntosh is lying in the middle of the room, the side of his head a bloody mess. A red-stained baseball bat, one of his exhibits, lies beside the body. I don't immediately assume he's dead, though the visual evidence suggests it and a check of the body con-

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firms it. I glance at the windows, looking for some sign of forced entry, and see none. Then I back Mrs. Winters out of the room.

"We can't help him," I assure her. "Nobody else must come in here. We'll have to call the police. County sheriff's jurisdiction, probably."

"Did someone—?"

"He didn't do that to himself. Could someone have broken in? Have you noticed any doors forced or—?"

"Mr. Gorgon, he had burglar alarms, a full security system. I don't see how—"

By the time the police arrive, I can tell them what they would have discovered immediately on their own: the grounds surrounding the house—a swamp of mud great for taking footprints—show no signs of an intruder. It's about certain one of the inhabitants of the house, Mrs. Winters or one of the five guests (counting me) must have done it.

The Malones, it turns out, don't alibi each other. They always sleep in separate bedrooms, at home and on the road. Nobody claims to have heard anything during the night that they couldn't attribute to rain, wind, and occasional thunder.

A couple of hours after dawn the five of us are sitting around the breakfast table as the Sheriff's Department investigation bustles on in other parts of the house. All of us have been questioned briefly and expect an interview at greater length after breakfast.

Al Hookstra seems the most grieved. "He was a terrific old guy, wasn't he? Who'd want to—?" Then he stares at his plate as if he realizes that if he can eliminate himself and Mrs. Winters, one of the rest of us must have done it.

Hazel Malone is looking sideways at her husband, the most subdued of the subdued group. "You sure set yourself up as suspect number one, didn't you, Joe?"

"What the hell do you mean?" he says, not looking at her.

"The way you tore into the poor old guy last night. It was all in fun, but you can't stand to be in the wrong, can you?"

"I wasn't in the wrong. And you may think somebody would kill just because he was mad at somebody trying to pin bad calls on him, but the police won't be that stupid."

"I agree," says Chester Valcour. "Not about anyone's alleged stupidity," he adds with an apologetic glance at Hazel, "but surely the motive had to be stronger than that. I understand you've had some experience of murder investigations, Ed."

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I mumble something noncommittal, but Al Hookstra picks up the ball. "Sure, you're known as the diamond dick, aren't you, Ed? Any ideas about who did that to poor Bernie?"

I shake my head, but I'm lying. I have a pretty good idea who killed Bernie, but no way in the world of proving it.

When my turn comes for more interrogation by the investigation team, I tell Deputy Spode, the detective in charge, "I think you'll have to look at a bunch of video tapes, Deputy. That's where you may find the motive."

"What kind of video tapes? Porn?" Nothing in his manner suggests the prospect excites him.

"No, sports stuff. Instant replays."

He grunts. "I'm not much of a sports fan. Now, my wife is different. I can't get her away from the TV on weekends during pro football season. I don't see it." He sighs, suggesting even porn would not be as boring a prospect. I'm not surprised when he asks me to view Bernie's collection with him as an expert consultant.

We watch everything. Even sports not represented by the guests—hockey, soccer, track, gymnastics. We go through all the stuff seen the night before, including some football snippets we didn't get to see because of Joe Malone's blowup. We go through a tape of racing stuff apparently intended for Chester Valcour and also not gotten to the night before. We get headaches and don't have much fun. But we find a lead to a murderer.

Late that afternoon one of the guests is telling us, "McIntosh called me out of my room after everybody'd gone to bed. Wanted to talk to me. Showed me something he had on a couple of his tapes that could have been quite innocent and could have been something terrible. I think he was going to blackmail me."

"I don't think Bernie would do that," I say, with half hearted loyalty. "He said he just wanted to clean up sports."

"But you didn't wait to find out, right?" Deputy Spode said to the guest.

"No, I went crazy." The guest isn't denying swinging the bat, because as one of Spode's men discovered while we were looking at the bad-call collection, Bernie had a hidden video camera, part of his extensive security system, taping his last meeting—the most damaging instant replay of them all and one that couldn't have pinned his killer more definitively. "I grabbed that bat and brained

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him with it, and I didn't know what to do next. I didn't know which tapes were the incriminating ones, and I didn't know how to use his VTR. Anyway, I couldn't risk being found there and I couldn't risk trying to destroy any of the tapes or having you find them in my room. I decided to brazen it out, just hope you wouldn't notice the same thing he did if you looked at the tapes."

"Wouldn't notice you in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong person," I say, "but once you know what you're looking for it stands out like a sore thumb."

"Nobody spotted it before McIntosh did," says the unhappy guest. "Who else would sit around looking at video tapes over and over again like that, looking for nutty connections? Who else had the time—or the interest? —How did you know what you were looking for, anyway?"

"Let's say I knew *who* I was looking for. As soon as I figure Bernie was murdered, I ask myself who is the odd one among the guests he invited this weekend? Which one doesn't fit in with the rest? Which one might be the person Bernie *really* wants to see, inviting the rest of us just as a blind?

"Three of us represent sports where all the officiating is done by eye, and so we take some convincing to start making use of instant replays to decide controversial plays. But one of us represents a sport where the subjective human eye is virtually outmoded and technology has been used in decision-making for decades. Horse racing has the photo-finish camera, the film patrol on each race from several angles. Why invite a racing steward here to convince him of the need for instant replays? I couldn't see any reason.

"Bernie wanted you here to talk about why you'd been caught on the edge of the walking-ring crowd by TV cameras three different times, talking to a well known confessed race-fixer. Maybe once he discovered this, he did further research on your activities he intended to spring on you. But to get you here, he had to have a trumped-up excuse, and Joe and Al and I were that trumped-up excuse."

"Do you want to phone a lawyer from here, Mr. Valcour?" asked Deputy Spode.

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a *NEW* Oscar Monahan story by

ISAK ROMUN

Relthi approached from a corridor to the right of the desk. He still had gloves on, rubber this time. Monahan followed him back the way he had come. Rooms off the corridor appeared to be small consulting rooms. On the walls were framed pictures of happy, laughing babies.

A story that poses several extremely "bothersome questions" for Oscar Monahan . . .

IN LOVE WITH DEATH

by ISAK ROMUN

My first meeting with Relthi sticks in my mind because I used it as an excuse to again put off talking to Ronny O'Daye, who was on the horn for about the third time in as many days. Naturally, the calls were person-to-person collect.

"I got someone here," I told Seana, the switchboard operator. "Get a number, I'll call back."

"I've got a number," she said tersely. "I gave it to you already."

"So I'll call when I'm out from under."

"And when'll that be?"

"Who knows." I hung up.

The one thing I didn't need was one of my occasional chats with Ronny O'Daye. They always cost me money and I was tired of supporting America's distilleries. But then, I wasn't too keen to chat with the smooth-faced man who stood in the doorway to my office either.

His features were set, immobile, as if the least tendency toward expression might tell more than he was willing to reveal. He was very short, and fat—but not, you know, sloppy about it, formed

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rather than filled; a man who would take his weight as a consequence of good living, but take it on his terms. He wore close-fitting, but not tight clothes which were obviously custom-made. He slid into the office, stood a few feet from the desk, and rotated a pearl-grey homburg in his gloved hands—a self-assured man trying to look self-conscious.

"Mr. Monahan, I'm Adolph Relthi," he said. "We've never met, but I know you know of me."

He was right. About a year before, in early '73, my editor wanted me to do a sweetheart story on Relthi. I refused. The assignment was passed to a writer who put together the kind of don't-make-waves piece my editor liked to read. Then I changed my mind and *did* write about Relthi, but in my column where I could get away with saying things I couldn't say in a straight piece. My editor wasn't happy with what I wrote. Neither was Relthi, who whipped off a blistering letter to the paper and, as I heard later, bustled from one lawyer to another getting educated on the law of libel. Luckily, I had passed my column through the legal department on its way downstairs to be set in type.

"What can I do for you?" I didn't get up, didn't stretch out my hand, and I noticed Relthi kept the two of his anchored to the brim of his hat.

"I'm here to talk about Nathan Peres who died yesterday. Perhaps you read about it in your paper."

"I hardly ever read the papers. What about—?"

"Nathan Peres. It's not a long story, but it will take a little of your time. May I sit down?"

I indicated the only other chair in the office. He sat in it, first putting his hat carefully on my desk. I was amused that he kept his gloves on. I would love to have seen those hands.

I asked, "Is there some sort of story in what you're going to tell me? Something of interest to the paper?"

"I don't think so, Mr. Monahan. I think what I want to do is engage you in service."

"I'm not sure I can do your kind of work."

His face went white, but he went on. "You have a reputation in this town for scraping away at something until it all comes out."

"Number one, I already have a job." I waved a hand around to show off the elegance of my cubbyhole. "And number two, I don't know what you're getting at, but it sounds like you want a detective. A private investigator."

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"As I said, you get at the bottom of things. Anyone who reads your column can see that. I know your publisher, I've already talked to him. He says it's all right."

He would. Relthi advertised in the paper. Take an agate line of space in *The Paulsburg Advance-Indicator* and the publisher would do anything for you short of giving you the plant.

"Besides," Relthi continued, "you won't spare me if what you find will hurt. I know how you feel about me. From that column you wrote some time ago."

His eyes, which had been avoiding contact since he entered the office, now bore into mine. They were light-blue, almost colorless, and dead.

"All right, what do you want me to get to the bottom of?"

"My father's death. Nathan Peres was my father. He adopted me, that's why the difference in our names."

"You think someone had something to do with his death?"

"Oh, no. Unless *I* did without realizing it. As a cause, you understand. It's pretty well established he shot himself. Yesterday, somewhere out in the country."

"Then why do you need me? Or anyone for that matter?"

"I want to know *why,* Mr. Monahan—why he killed himself. What turned his life to ashes?"

He paused, seemed hesitant, then appeared to make up his mind. "I want to show you something." He pushed his coat sleeve above the cuff of his shirt, unbuttoned the cuff, and pushed up the shirtsleeve until his forearm was exposed. I saw the number there, neatly tattooed.

I asked, "Which one?"

"Dachau."

I had never seen one of Hitler's death camps. The war ended for me at Bastogne when Patton's tanks liberated the place and I staggered to the rear with frostbitten feet.

I had seen photos of Dachau, though. And Auschwitz. And Buchenwald. And the rest of that labyrinth of terror on the map of Europe. Photos of ovens, of *Einsatzgruppen* in action, closeups of canisters of Zyklon B, the gas found effective in applying the "final solution." And I had seen photos of living skeletons and dead skeletons, the skin falling inward against the bones, like canvas on a sagging tent.

Maybe I said something out loud. Maybe my face spoke for me. In any case, Relthi responded as if reading my thoughts.

"To them we were subhumans. We were degraded to animals.

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Only your own life had any worth. And you'd fight to keep it. I was only eight, but I had a terribly adult mind. And a will to survive."

"And you did."

"And almost didn't except for Nathan Peres. He was a lieutenant then, in the American infantry."

Relthi leaned back in the chair and told me about that. He spoke dreamily, as if his mind had coursed back in years to that time and place that were Dachau.

When the camp authorities heard of the approach of the Americans, the gas chambers and ovens stepped up their "production." But the S. S.—those efficiency experts, adept at turning other people into lampshades and small bars of exquisite soap—panicked. When the gas chambers wouldn't carry the load, the guards reverted to less systematic forms. They took small groups of prisoners into a clearing in the woods outside the camp and shot them or clubbed them to death. Then, a sense of order returning, the guards stacked the bodies, cordwood fashion, a layer of logs, a layer of bodies, probably preparatory to burning them.

Eight-year-old Adolph Relthi was about to get his, a bullet in the head. He was not entirely clear about what happened. He remembered being forced to his knees, his head pushed down, feeling the small o of a pistol muzzle at the nape of his neck, the weapon pointed so that the bullet would travel up through his neck into his brain and out through the top of his head. Then, tensing for that one shot, he heard several others and thought wildly that his executioner had missed and was refiring, but inexplicably missing each time.

What he heard, though, was not the German firing. That German would never again fire a weapon. What Relthi heard was the staccato discharge of a complete clip of ammunition from a submachinegun held in the hands of Lieutenant Nathan Peres, who had sped ahead of his patrol toward the repeated reports of a pistol. He got to the clearing in time to save only young Adolph.

Relthi reached inside his coat and removed a sleek, flat leather wallet. From it he took a photo and passed it across the desk to me. "There he is, and I."

I saw a tall young man in Army combat dress. I looked from the small emaciated runt standing next to the officer to Relthi seated before me. I thought, What a difference the years and the right kind of life can make.

But there was more in the picture than Relthi and his future father. There was a stack of bodies—layer upon layer of bodies. The

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lieutenant, Peres, was staring at it, horror and terrible anger written on his features. The runt, his fingers entwined in those of the soldier, was looking at the stack also, but with casual dispassion.

Relthi went on. "That scene haunted him—his waking hours and his dreams—all his life. He often told me he had seen death time and again on the long passage to Dachau, but nothing had come up to what he saw when he got there. As for me, I saw in that scene a continuation of a life I had begun to think was the only life there was.

"To wind up, my father pulled some strings and got me to the States. He and his wife, who died some years ago, became my father and mother. There weren't as many problems about adopting me as you might think, my real family having literally gone up in smoke. The name, though—I insisted on keeping my own."

Relthi picked up the photo, looked at it. "He gave me everything—as well as my life. My education, guidance when I started out, money to get settled in Paulsburg."

I shuffled some papers on my desk. Relthi seemed to come alive at the sound. "Will you help me get at the bottom of my father's death?"

"I've a mountain of work here. Let me plow through it and I'll get back to you this afternoon. You'll be at your place?"

"Yes."

I took the photo from his hand. "Could I borrow this? I'd like to make a copy for our files."

"I'll do better than that. My father gave me the negative. I'll have it when you come by later."

I handed back the photo.

When Relthi left, I deposited most of the "mountain" in the wastepaper basket, grabbed my hat, and sailed out the door. Before I showed up at Relthi's place, I thought I'd get some information on Nathan Peres from another source.

In the lobby, Seana caught me just as I was about to go through the revolving door.

"You going to call that Mr. O'Daye?"

"Feeling sorry for him? He has that effect on people."

"No, but I'd like to get him off my wire."

I went over to her counter and picked up one of the instruments on it.

"Dial," I told her.

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She did, and in seconds I heard the ring at the other end. After about four rings a voice came on.

"Hogan's Bar," it said.

I shook my head, eased the receiver back into its cradle, and murmured, "You haven't changed one little bit, Ronny."

"I'd like everything you have on Nathan Peres."

I was talking to a powerfully built man in an untidy suit who stood away from me looking out a window at a traffic-congested street. He was big, well over six feet, his mass supported by a pair of splayed feet encased in scruffy shoes. He turned and gave me a questioning, incredulous stare from eyes that could have belonged to a St. Bernard. He had a thick, rough-textured face, and his nose had seen better days. His lower lip drooped at one side and if you missed his expression of ponderous alertness you might take him for far less than what he was—the sharpest cop on the Paulsburg force.

"Really, Oscar, everything?" Lieutenant Brosnan asked in a put-on brogue. "And will that be enough for you, Oscar?"

I probably winced. I usually do when someone springs my first name on me. Brosnan knew this—it was the price he exacted for favors.

"His son asked me to check out his death."

"Relthi?" Brosnan's eyebrows went up. "The very same one you burned with that column of yours?"

"That's the one."

"I don't understand why he'd come to you."

"I'm not sure I do, either. He just came down to the paper and gave me what I guess is his life story."

I told Brosnan everything Relthi had told me earlier. The lieutenant looked unimpressed, but when I finished he stalked over to a file drawer and pulled out a folder. He threw it on his desk and invited me to sit in his chair.

"It's pretty complete," he said. "I got a readout on him from a buddy in Chicago."

"Chicago?"

"You didn't know? Peres was visiting Relthi here. He lived in Chicago."

"No, Relthi didn't tell me." I sat down and spent time with the folder. "Where'd he get the gun?"

"His son's. It's registered. Peres apparently went to his son's

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home—he had a key—got the gun, drove out to the country, selected a clump of trees near the state pen, and shot himself. A guard heard the shot and reported it. My Chicago contact tells me Peres might have tried suicide at least once before. Nothing definite, just noise around the neighborhood, the good-neighbor grapevine. You know. Peres seems to have suffered from a general depression. The war, his wife's death."

"Is there any chance Relthi had anything to do with his father's death?"

"If Relthi hadn't an alibi, and if it wasn't such a sure case of suicide—well, he'd be my number one boy. Papa had a lot of money and Chicago tells me he'll get it all. And he can use it to cover some market losses he's taken recently. Seems he bought high and had to sell low."

I plucked a particularly gruesome photo from the folder. "Can I believe what I'm looking at?"

"Looks like someone came up behind him, don't it? It don't figure, though. His prints on the gun. Paraffin test says he fired the weapon."

"But why take a drive in the country? He could have done it in Relthi's house. That would be a lot more private, wouldn't it? Is there anyone there during the day?"

"Relthi's wife is out of town. A cleaning woman is there in the morning, but Peres shot himself in the afternoon."

"No matter what you say, it doesn't look like he shot himself. It's not possible to shoot yourself that way."

Brosnan made a gun out of his fist and index finger and brought the point of the finger around to the back of his head.

"Just possible. Even so, I can't bring the gun around to fire straight into the head. The barrel angles some. That's the way it was with Peres, though the angle indicates he must have strained to get the gun as straight as he could. If you're going to commit suicide, it's not a very efficient way to go about it. The bullet could have angled through his head and come out without touching the brain—or damaging it much, anyway. The least unsteadiness and he'd be alive."

"He's not, though." I held up the photo. "Can I get a copy of this?"

"Strictly against regulations."

"But can I get a copy?"

"Of course."

I replaced the photo in the folder. I closed the folder and handed it to Brosnan. "Thanks."

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"Any ideas?"

"Ideas? I don't even know what I'm doing and you ask me about ideas. Maybe after I see Relthi I'll have some."

"You going over *there?*"

"I said I'd see him there. Besides, I'm curious about what it looks like inside. When I wrote about it I was writing blind. And the answer might be there."

"Monahan, if there is an answer, you tell me!" Brosnan's voice had just the right edge of menace in it.

The place was brightly lit, engaging in a plastic, antiseptic way. I had come in the front entrance through a double line of picketers. Before me was a counter with a bakelite top, clear except for a pamphlet rack and a pad of forms. There was a big mirror beyond and above the counter, running the counter's length. Reflected in it was the neat lettering I had read outside on the plate-glass window—FAMILY LIFE CENTER—in a shallow arch. Centered below the arch was a depiction of a man and a woman, obviously husband and wife, and two kids, a boy and a girl, the girl the smaller. The parents were smiling painted smiles. So were the kids.

To the left of the counter was a medium-sized waiting room. Sitting in folding chairs were young women, some tense, some withdrawn, all apprehensive, and behind or next to most of them, their men, nervous and awkward in a place that was, more or less, just for women. No one spoke, and the men carefully avoided looking at their wives.

By the waiting room was a long corridor with curtained rooms on either side. I saw a woman clad in a paper gown and wearing paper scuffs go into one of the rooms, a woman being wheeled out of another. The corridor was so narrow there was barely space to maneuver the gurney around the turn.

"Can I help you, sir?" The receptionist, a good-looking blonde, was smiling at me with detachment.

"Relthi here?"

"Doctor Relthi? Do you have an appointment?"

"Just tell him Monahan is out here."

She picked up a phone, talked to it, then put it down. "Dr. Relthi will be with you in a moment, Mr. Monahan."

I had just seated myself when Relthi approached from a corridor to the right of the desk. He still had gloves on, rubber this time. "I'm very busy today, Mr. Monahan. Will you come into my office?"

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I followed him back the way he had come. Rooms off this corridor appeared to be small consulting rooms. On the walls were framed pictures of happy, laughing babies.

At the end of the corridor, a door opened on Relthi's office. It was cluttered with heavy cherry furniture upholstered in a maroon vinyl with ribands of off-white running though it, like marbled beef. Baby pictures decorated the ox-blood walls. A functional chain-suspended lamp struggled to put light in the dark room.

Relthi went to the desk. From its tooled-leather top he picked up a small manila envelope.

"Here's the negative. My father worked something out with the combat photographer to get it. Officially it's U.S. Army property, but I think the Army's given up looking for it." He tried a smile that didn't quite come off. "You will return it to me?"

"Yes." I slipped the envelope into an inner pocket of my coat. "Well, where do I start?"

"I don't know, Mr. Monahan. Perhaps I could tell you about my father. Our relationship. What we did together."

"The last sounds promising. But keep it current. Start with the last time you saw him and work back."

"That would be yesterday, here in this office."

"Why did he come here?"

"He visited me. I showed him around the clinic. He was curious. He didn't know what I do here."

"Did he say anything that stands out in your mind, that would give you an inkling of what he had in mind?"

"There was nothing out of the way. Pleasantries. Family talk. Little jokes we shared when I was growing up."

"This was here in your office?"

"Yes. On the tour, I did most of the talking, showing him things, how we operate. He seemed interested, asked one or two questions. What are you looking for?"

I shrugged. "I'll know it when I see it. Come on, take me on the same tour you gave your dad. Try to remember exactly what you said and say it to me the same way you said it to him."

The place seemed to consist of corridors. Relthi chatted easily, showing me one thing and another, like a kid showing off his toys. I saw the lab, got a detailed and incomprehensible rundown on the tests performed there. I saw a small computer center where data on each client were fed into an electronic memory and bills for services

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were spit out. I saw what he called his scheduling room, where three clerks serviced a bank of phones, making appointments, bumping them against the calendars of Relthi and his associates. I saw just about everything, including some sophisticated cleaning equipment which he assured me kept the place spotless. Finally, at the end of another corridor, we came to a big insulated door with a large iron handle. I had seen doors like this in meat warehouses and butcher shops.

"Here." Relthi held out a wool-lined coat. "It's below freezing in there." He shrugged into a smaller version of the same coat, opened the door, and we went in.

The door slammed behind us. For seconds we were in cold darkness. Then he pressed a switch and we were in cold light.

This was where he kept the bodies. Each was in a plastic bag. Most of the bags were frosted over. Some were not. These I could see into. I saw little humans, perfectly formed, still curled in the fetal positions. We walked from one compartment to another. There may have been a thousand of them. Relthi was talking. His voice seemed to rise and fall like a failing pulse.

"Biochemical units . . . subhuman tissue . . . by-product research . . . cost-effectiveness studies . . . economic factors . . . excellent laboratory work . . . always the bothersome questions of legality . . . "

I headed for the door. It seemed miles away and I couldn't seem to move fast enough, as if I were walking in hardening cement. I got there finally, found the plunger mechanism that opened the door, and walked out. In the corridor, I walked away from the freezer room, picking up speed, stumbling in and out of corridors until I was at the entrance with the counter and the smiling receptionist and the plate-glass parents and their kids. Then I was out on the sidewalk, breathing the air of a polluted city, taking in as much of it as I could as if it was the purest air I had ever breathed.

It wasn't until much later I realized I was still wearing the wool-lined coat.

"Wait, here he comes now."

I had swung into the lobby of the Advance-Indicator Building, my thoughts crawling over one another, and barely heard Seana. I was halfway up the stairs when her words got through to me.

"It's too late, Mr. Monahan. He knows you're here."

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I walked back and picked up the phone, massaging the back of my neck against a splitter developing there. "Hello."

"Oscar, long time no see. No talk."

The voice from the past, the voice I had been trying to avoid. "Ronny," I said, "what's up? As if I didn't know."

"It's different this time, Oscar. I got some kind of liver disease. I need it for medicine."

"How much?"

"Seventy-five."

"Only seventy-five? You've lowered your sights. Maybe you could borrow it from your friend, Hogan."

"Who, Burt? I'm into him for too much, Oscar. I couldn't ask for more. This place is going down and he has kids and a wife to support. Besides, he doesn't have it."

"Well, neither do I, Ronny. Not for you, anyway. Remember the hundred I sent you for your poor sick mother, so sick she'd been dead for two years? Remember all those other times you screwed me? I sure as hell don't, there were too many of them."

"Don't hang up—Oscar, listen."

"No, Ronny, *you* listen. Listen to this. It's something I've wanted you to hear for years. The sound of me saying no!" I jammed down the phone, hoping I'd taken Ronny's ear off. Seana was looking at me, one of those sidelong glances you use when you don't want a full view of something.

"Pretty raw. I only heard your side of it, Monahan, but pretty raw."

"I should have done that years ago."

"Because you didn't makes it all the more raw now."

I leaned on the counter and thrust my face at the switchboard operator.

She drew back a little.

"Let me tell you what's raw," I said. "Take a guy who's a newspaperman's newspaperman. Except he doesn't stick with the journals very long but cuts loose as a freelance. A recipe for poverty, right? Wrong. He makes it! Soon he's in *Esquire,* the *Post, Reader's Digest, Collier's,* all front-cover stuff—you name it, he has a byline in it. In his first year as a freelance he more than triples the money he got on his last paper.

"And he needs every buck of it to help him drink the world dry. As well as a first-class writer, he becomes a first-class mooch with his hand in all his friends' pockets.

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"He goes downhill. As he drinks himself into the ground, his work fails. He starts to miss deadlines. Soon no magazine will touch him. He becomes a stringer for a regional weekly. Now he gets paid by the column inch for what he writes. Raw? The waste of human talent of a high order! How's that for raw?"

The board lit up, buzzed.

Seana turned to it. "I got work to do."

I went up to my office and sat at my desk for a while, maybe an hour.

When I was able to put certain images and thoughts to the back of my mind, I prepared a print order for an 8x10, attached it to the manila envelope Relthi had given me, and put them in my Out basket. I wrote a note to my editor: "Don't look for me around here for about a week. You have ten days of my column on the spike." I threw the note into the Out basket, too, and took off.

Five days later I was back. I checked my desk top. The 8x10 had come back. There was also a note from my editor: "See me as soon as you get in, when you get in!"

Deciding to put off that meeting as long as possible, I was at my desk doing make-work things when Lieutenant Brosnan walked in on me. He had on a beat-up overcoat, a folded newspaper sticking out of one of the pockets. He handed me a large envelope. "Your suicide shot."

"Thanks."

I put the envelope on top of Relthi's photo.

"I thought you were going to keep in touch with me."

"I haven't been in touch with myself. If I didn't get violently ill when I booze, I'd still be out of touch. Want to know who killed Nathan Peres?"

"I wouldn't mind."

"Relthi."

Brosnan sat down. "How do you figure that?"

"It couldn't have been an accident. That icebox. They were stacked neatly on pallets, layer on layer, lathing between. Cordwood. It couldn't have been an accident that it looked so much like this." I picked up the Dachau blowup and gave it to Brosnan.

He studied the photo, then said, "Monahan, so far all I have is a sick picture and a hungover writer."

I told him about my visit to Relthi's place and what I'd seen in that freezer, how Relthi was distorting the Family Life Center by

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putting the fetuses to any commerical use he could find. Then I pointed to the photo Brosnan had in his hand. "Look at the way Peres—the soldier—is looking at those bodies. He must have looked at those in Relthi's freezer the same way. He must have thought he was back in the woods outside Dachau. Imagine what was going through his mind that day in the freezer."

"Like, Why did I save this kid?"

"Exactly. He'd saved him to do what had almost been done to him. He'd helped him conquer death and survive. Now Relthi makes it his servant. Hate something long enough and you start to love it. Relthi's in love with death."

"He's not the only one," Brosnan said. "But I guess what you're telling me is that the truth about his adopted son was enough to drive Peres over the edge. That plus his known instability."

"That's why he did it the way he did."

"Which means?"

"Shooting himself in the back of the head. Completing the execution he prevented almost thirty years ago." I fished the Peres' suicide photo out of the envelope. "He executed himself as Relthi was about to be executed by the S.S. trooper. In the woods near a prison. It all makes a kind of grim sense when you think back to Dachau."

Brosnan smiled.

"Gee, the prosecutor's going to love getting his hands on all this hard evidence."

I shrugged and slumped in my chair. "I'm not saying I have anything you can use."

Brosnan put the photos on my desk. "You're right, Oscar," he said softly, "you don't."

We sat a while, each with his own thoughts, then Brosnan let me have one of his. "I still can't figure why Relthi picked *you* to nose around."

"Was it Kennedy who said, 'Don't get mad, get even'? That's probably what Relthi was doing, getting even with me for that column I did on him. He knew I'd figure out what he did. He threw enough stuff my way and knew I couldn't do a thing with what I found." I examined his face, hoping for a sign of denial.

"Unforgiving bastard," was all he said.

That made me think about myself. I said to Brosnan, "I have to call a friend. Maybe you read something by him sometime. Ever hear of Ronny O'Daye?"

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"Big-name writer with more than seventy-five entries in *The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature?*"

"He could write circles around a lot of bigger names. How'd you know about the *Guide?*"

Brosnan pulled the newspaper from his pocket. He fought its pages until he found the one he wanted, then shoved the paper at me. On the page was a shot of Ronny taken when he got his Press Association award for a photo-exposé series he did with Abe Slaughter.

Below it was a two-column stagger head: NOTED WRITER DIES SUDDENLY.

"Some disease," Brosnan said. "Can't even say its name."

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

JEFFRY SCOTT

Steeple Oaks loved gossip, preferably malicious, but there was never any suggestion of impropriety between Simon Tiller and the housekeeper. Only a desperate woman, it was agreed at the Pig and Partridge, would marry the old swine, far less live in sin with him . . .

THE DECISIVE MOMENT

by JEFFRY SCOTT

The old jibe about stinginess might have been coined for George Tiller, and a few people did snigger that he still had the first pound note he'd ever earned. They were wrong. Peggy Drage had it, and many more besides.

Still, every village needs its characters. George Tiller—elderly before his time, cleanly scruffy in clothes bought at church rummage sales, forever hurrying as a man holding down two jobs must be—didn't quite fit the bill but he made a satisfactory object of amused pity.

British values have changed a trifle, on the surface at least, since the coming of the welfare state. More folks utter the heresy that what with inflation thrift isn't all it's cracked up to be, and you're a long time dead, my dear. I regret to say that when George pumped past on the old pedal bike he'd ridden to school a decade earlier, some citizens of Steeple Oaks would mutter, "Daft sod—what good's his money doing him, eh?" Then, like as not, they'd get into cars for which they would never finish paying and drive to the Pig and Partridge for alcohol they could not afford.

The secret answer was that George Tiller's money did him no good at all but the Drage sisters found it very acceptable . . .

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They were odd ones, too, Miss Peggy and Miss Dot, but they escaped being considered characters by doing rather well in a quiet way, late in life. Dot and Peggy, daughters of the village schoolmistress, had been pretty girls in their day, but though they were pleasant and polite enough, something about them was off-putting. Perhaps it was their stuffed-toy eyes, glassily staring, or the fact that their bodies ripened into rubbery, tubular lines. Somehow, while the local boys accepted the outward evidence of their femininity, none of them wanted to do anything about it.

Dot went off to be a nurse and made her spinster life in the Midlands. Peggy, an unthinkingly hard worker, was "less of a 'scholard' than the other one," and she became Simon Tiller's housekeeper at Millpool Farm.

In effect, then, she'd become George's stepmother after downtrodden Mrs. Tiller took the first decisive step of a lifetime by ending it with an aspirin overdose in the hayloft. Steeple Oaks loved gossip, preferably malicious, but there was never any suggestion of impropriety between Simon Tiller and the housekeeper. Only a desperate woman, it was agreed at the Pig and Partridge, would marry the old swine, far less live in sin with him.

As for Simon, he spoke well of nobody, any more than he'd do them a good turn. Therefore, little weight was placed on his frequent claim that his only son and heir was a halfwit. George, the village declared, was naught but a lad, after all, and too badgered and overworked for discernible qualities to emerge, either positive or negative.

Yet the senior Tiller's judgment was upheld by events after he keeled over in the barn, cracking his head on an anvil and expiring messily. For his son, at the kindest reading, didn't do very well out of it.

It made sense for young George to sell the place—it was a farm in name only, more the decaying remains of the main house in just enough land for a struggling smallholding. George didn't need four bedrooms, a leaky thatch, and a few acres of hard work. But Steeple Oaks was taken aback that it was Dot and Peggy Drage who bought it off him—though on reflection that, too, made sense as far as it went. Peggy had worked there for nearly twenty years and if she'd never earned much, she'd had little chance to spend much, either. And her sister Dot was ready for early retirement. They could just about swing the deal, no doubt, though why they should want to was beyond the Pig and Partridge.

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Then the Drage sisters raised a fine cash crop. Though the harvest was once in a lifetime, it was enough. Suddenly one of the local eyesores turned into Millpool Farm Estate, with half a dozen bungalows—expensive, people-boxes—growing on what had been marginal grazing for a few Friesians.

Accepting edged congratulations on her shrewdness at George's expense, Peggy Drage was not at all defensive. "Yes," she would agree, with that trademark laugh like a dropped platter juddering on a wooden table, "I think the poor boy's off his head. I told him we could probably get planning permission for building if we were patient. But he wouldn't have it—Master George wanted the money in his hand." Adding, with a sun-off-snow glitter in her stare, "He always was headstrong."

In parts of rural England, that label has less to do with stubbornness than it is a delicate suggestion of too much muscle replacing brain cells.

Contrary to expectation, George didn't squander his money on women and wine. Muscular head and all, he moved in as widow Morlock's lodger at the post office, got a job at the boot factory in Market Hargreaves, and worked nights as checker at the dairy.

Neither were the Drage sisters idle. They had the farm "done up" out of their profits, the barn and the hayloft demolished, and the yard landscaped until the millpool was the shining pewter centerpiece of scrupulously manicured lawns.

Peggy was an obsessive gardener. Dot's creative bent was painting, photography, and talking in clichés. As self-appointed social worker—"Take it from me, a nurse knows"—she was generous with advice and homely wisdom, if nothing else. Fall on hard times or battle ill health, and Dot, Olympus OM10 riding on its strap against her whale belly, would soon be breaking the news that the longest lane has a turning, and when one door closes another opens. If she sensed a certain restiveness at the receiving end, Dot's cheery stare never faltered. She had great faith in the truth of such aphorisms—in due course, faith was rewarded.

Steeple Oaks got a lot of innocent fun out of the situation. If old Simon Tiller had foreseen it all, folk chortled, he wouldn't have banged his head on the anvil, but held it firmly while jumping into the millpool.

Disappointingly, George Tiller appeared not to grudge Peggy and

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Dot their success. Once a month he had tea with them—Sunday tea at four o'clock, wearing his best second-hand clothes for the occasion.

"Well, she was as good as a mother to him," said the villagers, a shade dubiously—for Miss Peggy radiated all the warmth, maternal and otherwise, of an unlit stove. "Maybe if he stays the right side of her, she'll will it back to him."

Perhaps George entertained the same faint hope. For six long years after his father's death, he certainly never missed those Sunday teas.

But then he went calling on a Tuesday morning.

Standing on the pedals, George Tiller sent the patient old bike swaying along Oak Lane. Damn the woman! She had always been able to put him at a disadvantage!

She had done it just earlier, by hanging up on him. "I'm not bandying words over the phone, Georgie. Have a bit of sense, do. You'd better come round—*to my house.*"

Even under stress, she had managed the fractional pause, that gloating emphasis on ownership!

Oak Lane wavered before him, as if on the hottest day, and George, sniffing loudly, blinked tears of rage and frustration away.

Her house. Well, there was nothing to be done about that. But as for the money . . . The boot factory was laying off workers, and the semi-skilled went first, regardless of length of service. And he knew the foreman often thought him idle and listless when fatigued would have been a fairer verdict.

Ironically, the dairy had closed its Steeple Oaks plant the previous month. Things had been tight without that second paycheck, but he had consoled himself that he could do better at his day work and start looking for overtime. Now, however, with total unemployment pending, he was in a corner.

The trim thatch of Millpool Farm showed above the hedge and past the prim, tiled roofs of its cash crop. "The long and the short of it is I can't pay," George muttered, his foot slipping off the pedal, making him swear.

Flinging the bike down at the gate, pleased when its brake lever scarred the fresh white paint, George tramped up the front path. In Simon Tiller's era it had been beaten cinders, mud, and puddles. Now there were smooth flagstones where weeds knew better than to risk growing.

Coming here never failed to upset George. The shiny paint and

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polished windows were an inanimate version of the Drage sisters' smug stares. Everything just so—the grass Miss Peggy mowed with robot devotion and precision to get that banded effect that caught the light on a sunny day, the chintz curtains, the antique copper weathervane that had been a fixture among junk in the barn now riding high from a chimney, the rooster swelling its arrogant chest against the blue sky.

Crow away, you bugger, George told it grimly.

Miss Peggy startled him, rising suddenly from behind a cowed and disciplined privet hedge with Miss Dot's darkroom, a cedarwood shed, in solitary confinement beyond it.

Despite himself, George Tiller regressed to his teenage days, glancing back at the discarded bicycle and the gate left open.

"You always were untidy," she observed, a cigarette bobbing as she spoke. There was an eternal saffron smudge on her upper lip. It was trivial in its way, but that and the little ribbon of blue smoke rising from the tip of the cigarette to a few feet above her tightly permed head maddened George.

He hadn't smoked in years; couldn't afford it.

"Now then! What's all this nonsense about the money stopping?" Typically, she was walking away from him as she spoke. "I'm going to feed the ducks—bring that pail and don't swing it about or I'll have crusts all over my lawn."

To his fury, he obeyed. "It's not nonsense!" he cried. "I can't keep paying, and that's flat!"

She took the pail, unmoved, and tipped it into the millpond. "Well?"

George, totally nonplussed, heard a faint singing in his ears while he gaped at her.

Miss Peggy lit a fresh cigarette from the stub of the old one, which she flicked aside to die with a hiss in the breeze-feathered pool. The rooftree of the farm was reflected on it, jumbled and trembling as George Tiller's emotions.

"How long is it since you did for the old devil, Georgie? Five years? Six?"

"I never did! You saw it—he came at me and I ducked and put my arms up! It wasn't even a real punch!"

She laughed jarringly. "Sorry, yer Honor, 'is jaw struck my fist with brutal force. Ah, but I could've told a different story, my dear."

George shook his head stubbornly. "You've done your worst—I

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don't care. You made me sell you the house and give the money straight back once the lawyers handed it over. I had to pay tax on that, too! And nigh half my wages ever since. Well, do what you like, prison can't be worse than what I've got now."

"You're wasting your breath." She spoke pityingly. "I can't do anything—that's what I'm trying to tell you. Lord alive, the old devil was right, Georgie—you're mortal slow. —Maybe I would've told the police you murdered him, like I said I would. Maybe. But it was only my word against yours all along. You didn't stand up for yourself, so we'll never know, will we?"

George Tiller wanted to sit down. *Maybe?* She'd been utterly sure, convincing, terrifying, that morning when old Simon's blood was soaking the moldy straw.

"But now," she lectured, "I haven't a leg to stand on. Soon as the inquest and the funeral were over and I hadn't opened my mouth, *your* worries were over as well. How could I go to the police after all that and say, Sorry, I made a mistake. No, my lad, you got taken in."

"You kept taking the money," he whispered.

"You kept paying it," she countered. And with a spark of indignation, she added, "No good looking at me that way, Georgie, like I was the lowest of the low. I've worked hard all my life, been respectable, known what's what—I just took my chance when it came, same as your dad would have."

"*You kept taking it.*"

"Ah. Many's the laugh Dot and me have had, wondering how long it'd be before you twigged. Lord alive, of course I kept taking it, long as you were daft enough to pay."

Peggy Drage was incapable of fear in the presence of a man whose diapers she had changed. But a whining note entered her voice. "People think we've got it easy, but it's not. Dot and me never had that much money. We had to get one of those bridging loans from the bank to pay your lawyers in the first place—there was the interest on that to be found, and making sure the development firm didn't cheat us when they bought the field for the estate. We had to pay a chap just to protect us. Then there was putting the house and the rest of the place right. I kept taking it, indeed! Yes, I did—and glad to!"

She bent to pick up the pail. "We did better than *you* ever could have! You'd still be pigging it here with a bloody little dairy herd and rain pouring through the roof if we hadn't done the business

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right!" She shoved the pail at him, her face, sweaty now, only inches away. "Take a tip from me, Georgie, and count your blessings. Your worries are over, but mine will keep on."

She was mistaken about that.

George was unaware of grabbing at her, although his fingers registered contact on the material of her dress. And he heard the shriek.

Then she was falling back and his trousers and shirt were drenched from the splash.

Aghast, he looked around.

A couple of butterflies—scraps of gift-wrap paper—danced above the privet hedge, vivid against the background of the cedar shed. Starlings scolded and skirled on the roof.

I'll shut my eyes and open them, George told himself, and it won't have happened.

But Miss Peggy was shouting mutely up at him through the water. She was a little further out now, only one sodden billow of dress showing above the surface as trapped air escaped from her skirt.

George hurried away, sobbing for breath. But this time he did remember to shut the front gate.

Miss Dot considered that everything had gone off rather well. There had been an inquest because her sister's passing was sudden, but the veteran police-constable acting as coroner's officer had spared her feelings and the coroner himself was a poppet. Secretly, the surviving Miss Drage thought the men had made too much fuss over her sensibilities. If she had a pound for every dead person she'd seen, she'd be a rich woman.

Unzipping the black dress, she let the gasp of relief mutate into a giggle. She was a rich woman.

All her capital was tied up in Millpool Farm, of course, and the fair packet of money in the bank from the estate-sale profits had to pay the lighting and heating bills and see her through a comfortable old age. And there was a new enlarger she'd been admiring in *Camera Weekly* while waiting for the hearse to arrive. Very expensive, but she had to have it. Speak no ill of the dead, but poor Peggy had a nagging streak. No question of Dot acquiring a new enlarger while she was alive to forbid it.

"But she isn't, Tibs, and that's a fact." Dot padded downstairs, shoeless, her cat running ahead of her, and settled down with tea and toast and *Camera Weekly*. Really, the prices nowadays were

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unconscionable. And yet she owed that enlarger to herself, as an artist.

Not that her present equipment was poor. She could produce good material with it. Thoughtfully, her glance went to the locked drawer of her bureau.

Adequate material, she corrected herself, trying to justify the new enlarger. Five eight-by-ten prints. The camera had been on motor drive, just point and aim—cameras practically did it all for you. But it was the vision directing them that counted, though. That, and—what was Cartier Bresson's expression?

"The decisive moment," Miss Dot recalled, stroking the cat.

She thought it was "a bit off" that George Tiller hadn't attended the funeral. Poor Peggy had been a mother to the ungrateful wretch. Flowers weren't quite the same, even if he had sent an imposing wreath.

Her mouth thinned and turned down. Imposing—and far too costly. He shouldn't be throwing his money away on floral tributes. She must have a word with him.

She must speak to him about several matters. It was also "a bit off" that he hadn't thanked her for getting him that new job at Wakeham's, hardly half an hour's cycling from Steeple Oaks, practically on George's doorstep.

Miss Dot put the magazine aside and turfed the cat off her lap because she needed to concentrate. George must be spoken to in public, before ample witnesses, yet out of earshot. There was no great hurry providing she did it within a week or two. George Tiller was slow but he wasn't exactly stupid. Her prime task would be to explain the reason that he mustn't kill her. —Not that he had meant to kill Peggy. Very probably he had not. The doctor had often issued warnings to Peggy about her obesity and her heavy smoking and her tired heart.

George must not kill her, Dot, because the negatives of the prints she would give him were at her bank. And if she popped off meanwhile, then hard luck on George.

Miss Dot rose and fetched the bottle of Black Label she'd had to keep hidden from disapproving Peggy. Pouring herself a healthy portion, she giggled again. How long would it be before George remembered precedent, refusing to be blackmailed further because too much time had elapsed since Miss Peggy's death? A number of years, she suspected.

Then she'd have to explain about photography—how she could go

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to the police and explain that because the pictures were taken on the day of the tragedy, she had prepared negatives but lacked the heart to make prints from them. And then the shock of it! Unwittingly, she had managed to capture photographs of George Tiller pushing her sister into the millpool!

She imagined herself telling the detectives about it. "I was trying to snap some butterflies. I'm such an amateur, I must have forgotten to change lenses or something, because the hedge is hardly in focus, let alone the butterflies. But look what *is* in focus, in the distance—"

It could not have happened that way, but the police were unlikely to look a gift arrest in the mouth. Anyway, George Tiller, with a dead father and a dead unofficial foster mother in his past, dared not risk the hazard of explaining away a third fatality.

What had really happened was that Miss Dot had overheard enough of her sister's end of the phone conversation with George to cause her to lurk behind the hedge for its sequel. She'd meant to show Peggy photographs of the confrontation—as a joke only, of course, never realizing . . .

Dot retrieved the magazine and went over the enlarger's specifications for the dozenth time. George was relatively young, and wages went up all the time. Perhaps she was setting her sights too low. He could probably handle the hire-purchase payments on something even pricier than the model that had caught her fancy.

Recalling her sister's last words to him, she drained her Scotch. *Your worries are over.*

"We'll see about that," Miss Drage told the cat.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This first story #611 was written by D. L. Sproule, who works in the Creative Department of a Victoria, British Columbia, radio station: "In other words, I write commercials. Both my career choice and my fiction writing grew out of an extended internship in the Creative Writing Department at the University of Victoria (I'm still a part-time student—nine years after my enrollment). I'm thirty years old, married, and we're expecting our first child in 1984."

Ah, yes. Creative writing. Anyone who has seriously tried it will recognize the assertiveness, antagonism, insubordination, and recalcitrance of certain characters of their very own creation . . .

LABOR RELATIONS

by D. L. SPROULE

"Trapped in a short story. Now that's a dead-end job. No wages, lousy conditions, and the author thinks he's Raymond Chandler the Second." Grimknuckle mumbles to himself as he stops and peers into the darkness. Dilapidated tenements rise on either side, casting menacing shadows across the narrow street. As he stands there, hands thrust deeply into the pockets of his rumpled trenchcoat, he nods knowingly. "Rumpled trenchcoat. Great start. It's a wonder he didn't have me waking up on the couch in my office and drinking my breakfast right out of the milk carton. But he's got something better in mind. I mean, after all, we're still in the first paragraph and he's already got me risking my neck walking through the slums."

"You're on a case, Grimknuckle. So just get on with the story." I reply coolly.

"What kinda case? Don't you think you shoulda filled me in a bit before you started typing?"

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"You're looking for the killers of Jimmy Hoffa," I offer.

"Hoffa? Why Hoffa? The evidence all disappeared ages ago, if there ever was any."

"I had to justify the title somehow. And besides, you're a terrific detective. You come up with the clues everyone else missed."

"Can't argue with that. Or can I? Hey, if I'm so good, how come I can't afford a new trenchcoat?"

"You can. But you're in disguise."

"Jeez, is this guy confused. First it's Columbo, now it's Baretta. I'm scared to take off the hat. I'm probably bald."

"Don't be ridiculous. Let's just get back to the action, okay?"

"Action? You mean the story? Hey, what's gonna happen next?"

"Sorry, that would give you an unfair advantage."

Grimknuckle glares out from his ghetto backdrop. "Now don't give me none of your bull. So far, I'm the only pigeon you've got. Y'know I'd be the last guy in the world to say anything about a lack of plot, but it seems to me you need all the help you can get. There's gotta be a little give and take here, if you know what I mean."

"Well, all right," I concede. "You're about to come face-to-face with four Mafia hitmen."

"Four? *Four?* You ever hear of overkill? You put an unarmed man up against four guns from the mob and you call that a *story?*"

"Don't worry. You have a black belt in karate."

"Oh, really?"

"That's right, you studied under Bruce Lee when he was working part time for the Green Hornet."

"Yeah?"

"If I say you did, then you did."

"Oh, that's great. You ever try to karate-chop a bullet?"

"This is my story and everything will work out fine. Just let me handle it, okay?"

"It just ain't safe! I'm reporting you to the Worker's Compensation Board!"

"Forget it, Grimknuckle. If they find out you're fictitious, you'll wind up in jail for fraud. Face it. You're just a few scribbles on a page."

"I'd be more three-dimensional if you were a better writer."

"But you're not and I'm not, so let's just—"

"I'll go to the Fictional Characters Union! You'll look like a real creep when Anne of Green Gables, Mary Poppins, Shirley Temple—the whole lot of them—start following you around with pickets."

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"Shirley Temple's real."

"You gotta be kidding."

"No, honest to— Wait a minute, we're getting off the subject. You're a product of my imagination and you'll do whatever I decide! And now that I've made myself perfectly clear, we'll get back to the story."

Most of the streetlights have been broken by vandals. So Grimknuckle can't see the front door of a nearby building swing silently open. A long black Cadillac drifts slowly up behind him. Glancing nervously back, Grimknuckle increases his pace.

"Grimknuckle increases his pace! That means walk faster, you moron!"

"This is dumb. I'm not gonna be a participator in this nonsense."

"Okay. Have it your way."

The Caddy guns its motor and pulls within a few feet of the sullen detective.

"Roll down da window," Eddy "The Jackal" DiGiaccomo orders his driver. Two more figures in black pin-striped suits emerge from the tenement doorway, brass knuckles gleaming in the dim light. Eddy reaches under the dashboard, then sits back and levels his submachine gun at the preposterously motionless Grimknuckle.

Sweat leaps off the end of the pouting detective's oversized nose. "Look," his treble voice trembles, "maybe we can make a deal."

"What kind of deal?" I ask disinterestedly.

"Suppose I go along with you? Do you think you can get me outta this with a few minor flesh wounds?"

"Well—I don't know."

"I'll even put up with a shot in the leg. Us private dicks have gotta *live* with that sorta thing, you know?"

The Cadillac pulls up directly beside him.

"Well, come on! What do ya think?"

The chauffeur slouches down in his seat, out of the line of fire.

"Come on! Please!" Grimknuckle's voice rises.

"Oh, all right."

"What do ya mean, all right? How do I get outta this?"

"First, you pull the Magnum out of your shoulder holster."

"Magnum? I don't have a—how'n hell did this get here?"

"Now, you just dive down to the pavement and blow them all away."

"If'n I was youse," a voice growls from deep within the bowels of my typewriter, "I'd replot dis here bit. Before our frens on da outside

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takes youse on a tour of da riverbottom in a new pair a heavy-duty overshoes."

Eddy the Jackal stares out from the page, aiming his heater at my right eye. The other thugs pull weapons of every description from beneath their jackets. "Cuz we ain't real don' mean we's stoopid."

Four very mean-looking guns are pointed directly at me. I stare in astonishment at the page. It's incredible! My typewriter doesn't even type italics, but right there on the page are what looks like the mouths of four large cannons.

"Git in here," Eddy commands.

"Who, me?" I reply.

"Naw, Wendy, da good witch a da Nort! Now move dat pansyass in here before we got no choice but ta splatter youse ugly mug all over dis page."

"Is this rational?" I ask myself as I write myself physically into the plot.

The courageous author is grabbed and held by two of the hoods as the other two pace back and forth in front of him—that is, "me." (This situation could lead to serious point-of-view problems.) Grimknuckle sits down on the tenement steps, forgotten and grinning in obvious satisfaction. He lights up a Winston Plain and begins hacking violently.

"Why'd you put these things in my pocket if I don't smoke?" he asks me as he flicks the remainder onto the pavement.

"Isn't that the pack you got from your secret-agent friend in your last story? Gee, I hope you haven't forgotten about the one with the cyanide filter."

"The what?"

"One puff and—" I shrug. Grimknuckle is on hands and knees on the pavement beside the stairs. "But don't worry, Grimknuckle. The odds are better than one in fifteen—"

"Shaddup!" My arm is twisted brutally behind my back. I wheeze in pain, "You can't do this to me—"

"Oh, no?"

"No! I'm in control here!"

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Eddy and the chauffeur laugh. "Dat a fact?" Eddy manages to spit out before collapsing into hopeless hysterics.

"Well, if I'm not, who is?"

The laughter stops abruptly as we all stare out of the page directly at—*you*.

"Who're dey?"

"Readers."

"Dey mus' be doin' it, right?"

The author shrugs.

"Hey—youse out dere. Ya, *youse*." He jerks his thumb in my direction. "My five-year-ol' kid can write better dan dis birdbrain. So if'n ya ain't doin' it, whatdya say ya give it a go, huh? Leastwise—till my kid gets here?"

DETECTIVERSE

IN HOT WATER

by MARK GRENIER

In his hot-tub the sleuth grew reflective,
But the heating control was defective.
He had started to doze,
When the temperature rose—
The result was a hard-boiled detective.

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a *NEW* short story by

ANNA CLARKE

"Wouldn't you just love me to have an accident," Aunt Daisy said.

"No, we would not," said Philip patiently. "It's just because we're so worried about your having an accident that we've invited you to come and live here. Now here's your television."

"It's too big," said Aunt Daisy. "I suppose you'll be wanting me to pay for it."

"Of course not," replied Moira. "It's for your use. But if you don't want it, we'll take it away."

"That's right," Aunt Daisy told her, "deprive a poor old woman of her only little bit of pleasure . . ."

OUTSIDE THE LAW

by ANNA CLARKE

"It's going to be hell having her here," said Philip Breckridge gloomily to his wife.

"I know," agreed Moira, "but I don't see what else we could do."

The "her" was Philip's very aged aunt, no longer capable of looking after herself but so difficult to get on with that no nursing home would have her and no companion-help would stay more than a week.

"Something will have to be done, sir," said the police and the social workers who had been called out to the most recent crisis. Aunt Daisy had placed a pan of fat on the hot cooker and then proceeded to go to sleep in her armchair. Some time later neighbors rang the bell and hammered on her door and the window, but the old lady continued to sleep on while smoke filled the apartment and the smell filled the whole street.

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"She's a health risk and a fire risk to the entire neighborhood."

The emergency services knew her all too well. This was in the nature of an ultimatum. If Philip did not act, they would be obliged to remove her forcibly to whatever geriatric institution could not refuse to take her. Moira agreed that they couldn't let that happen. After all, she had been a fine and useful woman in her time—it wasn't her fault that she had lived too long.

"And it's not as if we hadn't the money or the room."

They were both in their late sixties, enjoying retirement after a full life of bringing up three children and following their own teaching careers. Their house was on the outskirts of a prosperous little seaside town. Aunt Daisy's apartment was near the center.

"She can have the garden room," said Moira. "If she starts a flood or a fire there's more chance of keeping it from the rest of the house."

"How about meals?" said Philip. "I believe she lives on tea and crusts of bread."

"She's not to go into the kitchen," said Moira firmly. "We shall have to lock it up when we're not using it."

"God, what a prospect. It would be easier just to lock her in."

"Oh, Philip!"

"I know, I know—we ought to try to respect her dignity as a human being, but how do you do that when the person concerned has reverted to infancy?"

There was no answer to this.

"The nursing agency will help us," said Moira at last, "when we want to go to the History Society meetings or to a concert. And we mustn't let her make trouble between us. She'll try it, you know."

Philip agreed. "And what about Polly? You know she loathes cats."

They were sitting in their living room, with the long windows open to the lawn on this warm June day. As Philip spoke, a fine black cat ran in from the garden, eyes bright, tail erect, and jumped onto Moira's lap.

"If Aunt Daisy does any harm to Polly," said Moira with great firmness, "I'll—I'll murder her."

The cat settled herself down with a little trilling sound of contentment. It broke the tension. They both laughed.

"There you are," said Philip. "Polly agrees with you."

Zero hour came.

Aunt Daisy was brought to "Ocean View" bitterly complaining that she was perfectly able to look after herself, that she was not

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going to give up the home she had lived in for forty years, and that she was going back there the moment she could escape from the wicked, greedy clutches of her nephew and his wife, who were only after her money.

She had once been a handsome woman, and even now her features were well marked—her mouth firm, her eyes a clear, pale blue. But she was very overweight, particularly for a sufferer from angina, her dress and coat were crumpled and stained with food, and her white hair, which was still plentiful, was matted and greasy.

She stood in the doorway of the long room, which had windows at both ends, one overlooking the garden, the other with a view to the sea, and exclaimed: "You don't expect me to sleep in *here,* do you?"

Behind her back Philip and Moira exchanged glances of desperation. Then Moira said briskly: "I think you'll find the bed very comfortable, Auntie, and we've fixed up a bell that you can ring if you ever need help."

"Need help? Why should I need help?"

"If you don't need to use it, then just forget it," said Philip. "Here is your bathroom."

"Bathroom? Why do I need a bathroom? I suppose you don't want me to use yours!"

Suddenly she began to shriek and to shake all over. Moira ran to her side, but it turned out that she was only laughing. "You can take all that rubbish away for a start!" she yelled, raising her stick and shaking it over the low shelf beside the bathtub. A jar of bath salts and a glass tumbler crashed onto the tiles and broke. Aunt Daisy shrieked again.

Moira bent down to collect the fragments of glass, muttering something about the danger of cutting one's feet.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" said Aunt Daisy. "Wouldn't you just love me to have an accident."

"No, we would not," said Philip patiently. "It's just because we're so worried about your having an accident that we've invited you to come and live here. Now here's your television."

"It's too big," said Aunt Daisy. "I suppose you'll be wanting me to pay for it."

"Of course not," replied Moira. "It's for your use. But if you don't want it, we'll take it away."

"That's right. Deprive a poor old woman of her only little bit of pleasure . . ."

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Two hours later Aunt Daisy was sitting in the garden room watching her favorite television program, shouting loudly at the characters she disliked and stamping her feet at those who met with her approval, while Philip and Moira leaned back in armchairs in the living room in a state of collapse, swallowed whisky, and looked at each other speechlessly.

Moira was the first to recover. "At least we've had no Polly problem yet."

"We can't keep them apart forever," said Philip. "How do you explain to a cat that it mustn't go somewhere? They always go straight for the people who dislike them. I suppose we couldn't—"

"I'm not getting rid of Polly! She's my cat!" said Moira violently. "And Daisy's my aunt."

"And I'd gladly nurse her and care for her, Phil. I wouldn't even expect any sort of gratitude or consideration for us. If she were just another difficult and feeble old lady I'd be able to cope all right. But—"

"But she's unspeakable," said her husband. "I know."

"How bad is her heart?"

"You know how it is with angina. It could be any moment. It could be months or even years."

"I hadn't realized before how violent she is," said Moira thoughtfully. "She could easily do herself an injury."

"Are you suggesting—?"

They stared at each other.

"Look, let's not say it," said Moira at last. "I know what we're both thinking but you know how superstitious I am about putting things into words."

"Yet you said you'd murder her if she did any harm to the cat," Philip reminded her.

"That was in the heat of the moment. Not premeditated. Oh, for heaven's sake, Phil." She got up to open the long window for Polly to come in from the garden. "We're civilized people. We can't help hoping that she'll soon die quickly and easily, but it stops short at just hoping. Doesn't it?"

Philip regarded her thoughtfully. "Does it?"

Polly was a young and lively cat, a keen hunter, and as inquisitive as all the rest of her tribe. With the garden, the kitchen, and the living room (under supervision) to roam in, she was not short of objects to stimulate her curiosity, and the garden room, which was

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used only when some of the family came to visit, had never been one of her haunts. A quick sniff around to ascertain that nothing of interest was happening in there was enough for Polly on those rare occasions when the door of the room was left open.

But after Aunt Daisy's arrival it was a different story. The apple trees, the jungle of shrubs and long grass at the far end of the garden, the neighbor's holly bush where sparrows nested—all were deserted, and Polly spent much of her time sitting in the hall outside the door of the garden room, fascinated by the sounds and smells that came from within.

"How can Auntie make such a noise!" cried Moira and Philip to each other. "You wouldn't think she'd have the strength to bang things about like that!"

As for the smells, since Aunt Daisy herself was none too clean and absolutely refused ever to have a window open, the atmosphere in the room rapidly became very disagreeable. The nurses who came from the agency complained about it and none of them would ever take on the job again.

"It wouldn't be allowed in a hospital," they said. "Cases of senile dementia are kept under sedation."

"Then can't you give her some tranquilizers?" asked Moira.

"As if we haven't tried!"

"Oh, dear. But if they manage it in the hospital—"

"In the hospital there's other staff to back you up," was the rather grim reply.

After a while Philip and Moira not only gave up all attempts to lead any life of their own, but they also abandoned their efforts to treat Aunt Daisy like a human being who could be made happy and comfortable, and concentrated solely on their own survival. To their great relief she refused to eat with them, but since she also refused to eat anything brought to her on a tray, there was nothing for it but to let her help herself in the kitchen. She needed constant watching, and cleaning up after her was a major operation.

It was here that the feud between herself and Polly was carried to its greatest lengths.

Normally, the cat was well behaved in the kitchen, except when subjected to the irresistible temptation of a chicken bone let fall to the floor, but Aunt Daisy had only to place a piece of food of any kind on the table or on the counter for it to disappear in a flash. Then all hell would break loose. She would scream and swear and throw knives and plates at the cat, who always managed to es-

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cape—except on the occasion when Moira found Aunt Daisy in the act of heaving the cat up by the tail.

Bedlam ensued. Moira's rage outdid even Aunt Daisy's swearing and Polly's agonized howling.

"That vicious beast!" screamed the old lady. "I've a good mind to poison it! There's no law against poisoning a cat!"

"If you harm my cat I'll poison *you!*" yelled Moira in return. "It's *you* who's the vicious beast, you horrible, filthy old woman! It's *you* who ought to be put down, making our lives a misery—and after all we've tried to do for you!"

"Help, help!" cried Aunt Daisy, subsiding onto the kitchen chair. "Help, Phil! Your wife's trying to murder me!"

Philip rushed in from the garden to find that Moira, beside herself, was tugging at Aunt Daisy's hair.

"She was torturing the cat!" cried Moira. "I want her to know what it feels like!"

"But Polly's all right, dear." Philip tried to soothe his wife. "Look, she's drinking her milk."

At last Moira was induced to let the old woman go, and Philip escorted her to the garden room. She was breathless and seemed to be in pain.

"My pills," she gasped.

When he got back to the kitchen he found Moira resting her head on the kitchen table, silently weeping, while Polly, on the table, rubbed against her hair and licked her hands.

"Come," said Philip, "I'll get you a drink."

"We can't go on like this," he said a little later.

"I'm not getting rid of Polly." Moira's tone threatened hysteria again.

"No, no. I meant get rid of Auntie."

"But how? Unless we let them shut her up in one of those ghastly places."

"That's not what I've got in mind. Will you leave it to me?"

Moira nearly asked what he meant, but decided not to. "I'll go up to bed now," was all she said.

"And I'll answer the bell if she rings."

"You'll be careful, won't you, Phil?"

"Very careful."

He's going to do something to Auntie, said Moira to herself as she went upstairs. Or perhaps it's already been done. That heart attack.

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The pills he gave her. Little white ones, not unlike those that Philip took for migraine. Now just suppose—

Moira's thoughts raced. Suppose Philip had given her the wrong drug. Would the doctor suspect? Would there be a post-mortem? Could it be proved that Phil had made a mistake? When he came to bed she longed to question him but dared not. Had she not said herself that it was best not to put things into words?

She was exhausted but she couldn't rest. At about 2 A.M., when Philip was fast asleep, she got out of bed and crept downstairs in the dim light of the landing to listen at the door of the garden room. There wasn't a sound. Was it not ominously quiet? Usually one could hear Aunt Daisy snoring or moving about and muttering to herself.

Moira turned the handle and pushed the door open a little way. The room was very dark; the stuffy smell was overwhelming.

"Are you all right, Auntie?"

The words formed in her mind but stuck in her throat. She didn't know whether or not she had uttered them aloud, but in any case there was no response.

Asleep? Or dead?

After all, the doctor had said she might well die in her sleep.

Moira's hand reached for the light switch and then she changed her mind. She felt faint and giddy. It was pointless to investigate now. In any case, it would make no difference. If Aunt Daisy was sleeping quietly, it was senseless to wake her. If she was dead, she would still be dead in the morning.

Moira crept back upstairs, swallowed a sleeping pill, and didn't wake until the sun was streaming into the bedroom and Philip was standing beside her with a tray of tea.

"I've got a bit of a shock for you," he said, pouring her out a cup.

"Auntie?"

"Yes. She must have died in her sleep. I've rung Dr. Knowles. He'll be here shortly. Drink your tea, love. I knew it would be a shock, although of course it was to be expected at any time."

"But Phil—" She broke off. Should she remind him of what he had said about getting rid of Auntie? In the turmoil and misery of yesterday evening anything had seemed possible. In the bright light of this summer morning it seemed out of the question that the man with whom she had lived in harmony and devotion for nearly forty years could be a murderer.

Philip was looking out of the window. "That's his car," he said. "I'll go down and let him in."

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Moira put on a dressing-gown and followed him.

Dr. Knowles was a youngish man, sympathetic and efficient, who knew the Breckridges well and had in fact been wondering what could be done to help them.

"Well, there it is," he said after he had leaned over Aunt Daisy's bed. "I won't pretend to be sorry for any of you. It was much the best way."

"Her heart?" ventured Moira.

"Oh, yes. Just what one might expect. That row you said you had last night probably contributed to it."

Moira burst into tears.

"My dear," said Philip, "you musn't blame yourself. It's a wonder that you never lost your temper before."

Dr. Knowles handed him the death certificate. Moira continued to sob.

"You've been under too much strain," said the doctor kindly. "Would you like me to write you a prescription?"

Moira shook her head. When Dr. Knowles had gone, she said to Philip: "Did you see her hands?"

"Those scratches, you mean? Yes. I suppose Polly made them yesterday evening when Auntie was teasing her."

"I wonder." Moira was very thoughtful. "Phil," she said presently, "when did you open the window in the garden room?"

"When I came in and found she was dead. The air was perfectly foul."

"So it wasn't opened till after she was dead?"

"Of course not. She never opened it herself. What are you getting at, Moira?"

"I'm trying to get at an explanation that will save us from spending the rest of our lives each suspecting that the other killed her. You didn't see Polly, by any chance?"

"Polly? I haven't seen her this morning."

"But she could have been in the garden room and got out of the window without your noticing?"

"I suppose so, the rate she moves. And I was concerned with Auntie."

"Then I believe that's it!" cried Moira excitedly. "I came down in the night because I couldn't sleep, and I opened the door, but I didn't go in. Polly could easily have shot in and got shut in. She'd have been in there for hours, sniffing about. And leaping about. You know it still gives us quite a shock if Polly manages to get into our bedroom

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and wakes us up by walking over our faces, and we're used to her and we love her. And we haven't got weak hearts. But Auntie—"

Philip had been listening intently. "You could well be right. Those scratches—"

"They weren't done last night, I'm sure. They were in quite the wrong position. D'you think Dr. Knowles noticed them?"

"Surely he did. Shall we ask him?"

Moira shook her head. "Let's keep our theory to ourselves. The doctor's satisfied. And she *did* die of a heart attack after shock. And as long as we don't suspect each other—"

She broke off as the living-room door, which was slightly ajar, was pushed open wider to reveal a sleek black head with bright green eyes.

"Polly," said Philip, "come here, you bad puss. What's that you've got in your mouth?"

"A field mouse?"

"No. It's nothing living." Philip bent down. "It looks like a bit of fur, though."

They examined it together. "It's fabric fur," said Moira at last. "It's like that torn old rug that Auntie insisted on having on her bed."

They looked at each other. Polly mewed loudly, demanding the return of her stolen treasure.

"Now for heaven's sake don't start feeling guilty for letting the cat into the room," said Philip. "Dogs are covered by law, but cats aren't. You can't be sued for any damage they do."

"Nor claim against anybody who damages them, as Auntie said herself. It works both ways."

Moira dropped the piece of fabric back onto the floor for Polly to play with and then sank down on the arm of Philip's chair and clung to him, half laughing and half crying. Presently she said: "What was it you had in mind, Phil, when you said last night that we must get rid of Auntie?"

"Oh, just an idea," he replied lightly. "I'll tell you about it sometime." He reached down to stroke the cat. "Like Polly's antics, it didn't come within the law."

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a *NEW* Ganelon story by

JAMES POWELL

Like many a down-on-his-luck Russian confidence man before him, Sirin had set out to do the Wandering Jew—Ahasverus, the Jerusalem shoemaker doomed for an ancient sin to walk the earth until the end of time . . .

THE STRANGER AT THE CROSSROADS

by JAMES POWELL

On a December day in 1875, an old-fashioned locomotive with a funneled smokestack and an open blue sled drawn by four horses dashed from different parts of the morning gloom to converge on a small station on the St. Petersburg-Pavlovsk line. When the red-sleeved driver leaped down from the sled and opened the door, the first man to step onto the station platform looked about alertly, keeping one hand in his overcoat pocket. The next man was short and clad in fur from tip to toe, giving him a jolly, roly-poly air which one glance behind the upturned lapels of the shaggy overcoat would have dispelled. Ambrose Ganelon had a scowl for every occasion, and the one he directed against the Russian winter was worthy of the great Napoleon himself. The master detective turned back to the sled, stuffed an immense fur mitten into his armpit, and offered a bare hand to the grey-whiskered man in the army greatcoat. General Maxim Rostoki bid Ganelon farewell and thanked him once more on behalf of the Russian people for discovering the whereabouts of the valuable pearl whose disappearance had contributed to an uprising in Bokhara.

Having taken his leave, Ganelon crossed the platform to the an-

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cient overstuffed railway carriage at whose door Sergeant Lucas, his bodyguard, stood, a hand on the pistol in his overcoat pocket. Lucas stepped inside first, which meant the carriage was occupied. Ganelon followed and closed the door behind them.

The locomotive gave a sharp whistle and moved out of the station. Ganelon reached into his furs to consult a fat silver watch, and gave a satisfied nod as if he was among those who found pleasure when trains leave on time. Then he turned his attention to the third person in the carriage. The slim, high-cheekboned man wore a well fitting dove-grey overcoat with a black astrakhan collar and hat. He returned the detective's gaze with the half smile of someone who hopes to be remembered.

If their paths had crossed, then the man must be a criminal. The forthright and innocent gaze reduced that vast category dramatically, for it was the mark of the confidence man. In his mind's eye, Ganelon outfitted the clean-shaven face in a variety of beards and moustaches until he reached the beard Imperial. Now Ganelon had his man. A few years before, the Riviera had received a visitor claiming to be the legendary Saint-Germain the Deathless, who could remove flaws from diamonds and increase the size of pearls.

"It was warmer when last we met, Mr. Sirin," said the detective.

Andre Sirin's delight at being recognized was childlike. "I miss the Mediterranean sun very much, Mr. Ganelon," he said. "But of course I will never make the mistake of plying my trade in your beautiful principality again." Then he looked left and right as though afraid he might be overheard. "Did you know your nemesis, Dr. Ludwig Fong, is offering your weight in gold to the man who kills you before you get back to San Sebastiano?"

"And a silver loving cup," added Ganelon. "Yes, we know all about Dr. Fong. Sergeant Lucas has the matter in hand. But thank you. Now, tell me, how are you? Your current line of endeavor seems to be a prosperous one."

"I am president of the Bering Strait Railroad Bridge Company," announced Sirin proudly. He went on to describe his projected suspension bridge spanning the Bering Strait and connecting the railway systems of Europe, Asia, and Africa with those of the Americas. He pulled out a company share so Ganelon and Lucas could admire the quality of the paper stock, the printing, and the elaborate engraving-work depicting two giants meant to represent the spirits of the Old World and the New standing waist-deep in the Bering Sea supporting an immense bridge of steel across their backs.

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"I invested my last penny in that printing job," smiled Sirin shyly. "Now today I am a wealthy man with important friends, an office on the Nevsky Prospekt, and four salesmen traveling the country to sell my stock. Who would believe that a scant three years ago I was a fugitive wandering the back roads with a scrip and staff?" He shook his head in happy wonderment. Then he gave the detective a sly look.

"I am reminded of your celebrated scorn for the supernatural, Mr. Ganelon," he said. "But in my travels I came upon a most extraordinary happening. Listen to what I have to say and tell me what other explanation is possible."

When Ganelon made no objection, Sirin told his story. A few years back, several failed enterprises obliged Sirin to attach himself to Sobiakin and his gang of St. Petersburg coiners.

Now, coiners are traditionally a non-violent crew, but there was one among their number who had sworn to himself that he would never be taken alive and sent back to prison. To this end he carried a revolver, about which the others knew nothing.

One night when Sirin was away from the hideout, the police arrived, broke down the door with sledgehammers, and burst in on the gang before they could consign all the evidence to the smelter. In the panic, a shot was fired and a policeman killed. Throughout the trial of the Sobiakin gang and the manhunt for its remaining members, Sirin was hidden away by a man who made a living providing just such a service. Sirin was almost at the end of his money when the spring thaw arrived in its sudden rush. In an hour, the ice broke on the Neva as though the world itself had hatched from the egg of winter. The open countryside called.

Sirin sent his host to the used-clothes dealer in the Haymarket to buy the oldest caftan and broad-brimmed hat and most dilapidated pair of boots he could find, and a full beard from a costume shop.

Early the next morning, with his disguise packed in a sack, Sirin took a wheeled omnibus smelling of the stable where it had passed the winter to the outskirts of the city. There he started to walk. Like many a down-on-his-luck Russian confidence man before him, Sirin was setting out to do the Wandering Jew. For centuries, frauds and madmen had roamed Russia claiming to be Ahasverus, the Jerusalem shoemaker doomed for an ancient sin to walk the earth until the end of time.

Sirin's technique was to visit a rural vodka shop and over a plate

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of food ask a few idle questions about the next village down the road. Usually he got more gossip than he could use. Then he would change into his costume in the bushes and enter the village slowly and wearily, with downcast eyes. The loiterers would elbow each other and snicker at his woebegotten boots. Then Sirin would look up and appear to be confused by what he saw. Turning to the oldest of the onlookers he would say, "Brother, I am looking for the village of Such-and-Such but I seem to have lost my way."

"Brother," the elder would laugh, "this is Such-and-Such."

And Sirin would shake his head sadly. "How it's changed."

"Such-and-Such never changes," the old man would insist.

But Sirin would say, "Two hundred years ago, So-and-So had a big house there," mentioning the name of the family with pretensions. "And there was a blacksmith's shop over there."

And who could call him a liar? Some simple person was bound to ask, "Are you two hundred years old, then, brother? Come rest a bit with us."

Shaking his head sadly, Sirin would tell them he was a great and ancient sinner who could only rest when he might edify others with tales of his journeys down the long corridors of time where he had learned to seek forgiveness and to do good and avoid evil. Soon the entire town would be crowded around him, hanging on his every word, mouths ajar with amazement.

He told them of his endless travels, of the fierce blue-skinned Welshmen who did not know to wear clothes, and of the mighty Northmen who had horns that grew right out of their heads and pierced their very helmets. And if Sirin had determined the most unpopular man in town, he would point him out to all as the living image of Attila, the merciless King of the Huns. Then he would speak of the King of England with a lion's heart who fought the mighty Saladin, who ruled a sandy kingdom like a vast seashore without a sea. Or of the city called Paris, whose inhabitants were so ignorant they spoke no Russian at all. Or of the Antipodese, whose people walked around on their hands and were poor because all the money fell out of their pockets. Then he would tell them what their village and their ancestors were like two hundred years before.

This done, he would stand up as if to go, while they crowded around, pressing small coins on him and encouraging him to spread his wonderful message. Sometimes on his way out of town, they would ask him to resolve some boundary-marker dispute based on

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his last visit. He always made his judgment by calculating which man would reward him with the largest coin.

At the edge of the village, Sirin would turn to the crowd and say, "When I return in another two hundred years, you will all have gone to the blessed rest I seek. Your village will be much changed and your descendents will ask me about you just as you asked about your ancestors. I will tell them you were upright, god-fearing people. I go now. Please pray for me."

With that, he would turn and stride away, his head bowed as if under a great weight of sorrow. And, of course, some would always run after him with another coin and say, "Speak well of Stefan the tailor." Or, "Tell my people not to believe the story about me and the widow Rûbianka."

Sirin shook his head, half amused, half amazed. "Once," he said, "a little old woman pressed six silver roubles into my hand. 'When I die,' she said, 'my son will only drink this up. When you come this way again, give this money to the Popovs and tell them to have Masses said for me, a great sinner.' "

Ganelon had been staring out the window at the haggard, undulating landscape of frozen muskeg and stunted pines. The gaze he turned on the confidence man was disapproving.

"I repaid them handsomely for each coin," insisted Sirin. "You had only to see their faces to understand that. For them I was someone who had walked two thousand years down the road of history. At worst I was an edifying sideshow. At best I changed their simple lives from mere specks in the vastness of time to links in a chain of blood stretching far back into the past and far ahead into the future."

"Continue your story," said Ganelon, who was unswayed by the rhetoric.

The end of June found Sirin in a vodka shop a few versts from the village of Brosno, the Wandering Jew's next target. From the talkative landlord, he learned that the most unpopular man was a blasphemous horsetrader and moneylender named Pugachev, whose plan to buy up all the land around the village was being frustrated by an upright farmer named Simonov who swore he would never sell to him. An ancient hatred stood between these two men. A pair of their ancestors as close as brothers had robbed and murdered a local nobleman alone in his house. Simonov, given the job of hiding

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the loot, underwent a sudden religious conversion and went to Pugachev to urge they confess everything. In a black rage, Pugachev stabbed his accomplice through the heart without discovering where the treasure had been hidden.

Armed with this possibly useful bit of history, Sirin set out for Brosno, which stood a short distance beyond a spot where two roads crossed. The wooden onion-domed church rose from a glade of silver birches. The village itself, a collection of unpainted log cabins with fretwork decorations under the eaves, was arranged haphazardly around a muddy square smelling like a barnyard. A great oak shaded the square.

Sirin chose late market day when people would have begun to visit and gossip so the bustle of affairs would not distract them from his weary, downcast arrival. He might have spared himself the calculation for the entire village was gathered beneath the oak, held spellbound by the words of an old greybeard with wild hair down to his shoulders, who sat on a box with his back against the tree trunk, a staff and leather scrip across his knees.

Running into another Wandering Jew was a common risk of the confidence man's business. All he could do now was to discover which way his rival went when he left. Two Wandering Jews on the same road meant one would starve to death. Meanwhile, Sirin stood at the edge of the crowd to pick up what pointers he might from his rival's performance. The man had done a convincing job on his appearance—a weathered face lined with weariness, sorrowful pools for eyes, a voice deep and slow. His words were as plain as bread. When he described the great personages he encountered on his travels, any man in the crowd could have found the man in his neighbor. It amused Sirin that when the old man described Attila the Merciless riding at the head of his horde, the crowd turned as a man to look back at the churchyard gate where a wolf-faced priest in a cassock of the blackest black was watching the proceedings with interest.

But the old man's final judgment on history was a peasant's perspective. "The armies marched this way," he said. "The armies marched that way. When spring came, the land was plowed. With autumn came the harvest. When I walked eastward I kept the morning sun on my left cheek. When I walked west it lay across my right shoulder." With this, he took up his staff and stiffly began to get to his feet. The crowd begged him to stay, and someone, as someone always did, asked him to describe their village and its people two hundred years before.

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"Friends," he said, "I cannot tell you that. When I visited Brosno last, it was after midnight. A dog barked. A horse whinnied in a stall dream. A bat staggered across the sky. Your village slept. But there was no sleep for me. I can only rest when there is someone to tell my story to. The walking is my punishment. The story is my atonement. So I walked on."

He stopped as if this was the end. Then he continued as though animated by a sudden memory. "I was weary and aching to rest. Some distance from your village, I saw a light in the woods. Perhaps a house where I could sit and tell my story. I walked toward it. But the light was from a lantern hanging in a tree. Beneath it a small man with a turned-up nose and hair as red as a carrot was digging in a hole with a shovel. On the ground lay an iron box."

Here, some in the audience looked to the back of the crowd where a red-headed, snob-nosed farmer sat on a wreck of a wagon with an ancient plug between the shafts.

The old man continued, "I could tell from the fellow's furtive ways that he was a evil-doer. I stepped into the circle of lantern light and said, "Oh, brother, abandon these false ways!' The man jumped out of the hole, his face full of terror and guilt. Had he been larger than I, I know he would have done me harm. He licked his lips and looked around like a cornered animal. Then he opened the box and pressed a golden goblet into my hand.

" 'This is for you, brother,' he said. 'Go away and forget what you've seen!'

"When he opened that box, I saw rubies as bright as sacramental wine and coins as gold as ikons. " 'Brother,' I said, handing him back his cup, "I care nothing for the things of this world. If you will but hear my story and allow me to rest, you have nothing to fear from me.'

"So we sat there with the darkness all around us and I told him who I was and of my endless wanderings and my hope for forgiveness. When I was done, he fell on his knees and repented his sin. He told me that he was a robber and an accomplice to murder. I told him he must convince his partner to repent and go with him to the authorities.

" 'But what about this?' he asked me, pointing at the iron box.

" 'Bury it deep,' I told him. 'Leave it beneath the ground with the dead man to whom it belonged.' Then we embraced and I continued my journey, leaving him behind me filling in the earth over the box."

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Here the red-headed farmer jumped down from his wagon and the crowd parted to make way for him. He came up to the old man, who was leaning on his staff. "That man was my great-grandfather's father," the farmer said. "I am Simonov."

The old man peered into his face and nodded. "Yes, you are."

"Can you take me to the place where the box is buried?"

"That box contains the spoils of evil, brother."

"The sin was not mine," said the farmer, "but the land is. I am a poor man. Lead me to the treasure and I will give you a tenth part."

The crowd sucked in its breath.

But the old man spat on the ground. "The road of centuries has taught me that the poor are generous but the wealthy are not. I would take a poor man to the spot, but it would be a rich man who walked away from it. Besides, I want no part of blood-stained treasure. I need Masses for my soul. I need candles for the holy pictures." The old man turned away from Simonov and gestured with his staff for the crowd to let him pass.

But Simonov lay his hand on the old man's arm. "How many Masses, how many candles for you to lead me to the treasure?" he asked warily.

The old man told him, adding, "But I must see you place the money in the priest's hands before I take a single step. And if I do not lead you to the treasure, then you and your friends may do with me as you like."

Though Simonov might have handled the cost of the Masses and the candles after the harvest, it was more than he possessed at that time of the year. He looked around at his fellow farmers, but they all turned away.

At that moment, a well fed man with whiskers like a cat on his upper lip rode into the muddy square on a fine chestnut horse. Someone muttered, "Pugachev."

Simonov turned. His neighbors watched the anguish on his face and then saw his jaw go tight. Simonov strode over to the moneylender and the crowd turned as one to watch like the audience at a play. They saw the farmer take off his hat and stand at the horse's stirrup and speak to the rider. They saw the gloating moneylender point to the vodka shop with his riding crop. They saw the two men cross the square, the one on horseback, the other on foot, to seal the bargain. Sirin later learned the terms of the agreement from a man

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who witnessed the document. Simonov agreed to pay twice the sum he borrowed in thirty days or forfeit his farm.

When Simonov left the vodka shop, he led the old man straight over to the churchyard gate. Once the priest's hand had closed on the money, the old man and Simonov got up onto the farmer's wagon and, with Sirin and the crowd walking along behind, they rode out of the village. Twice the old man ordered the wagon to stop while he scrutinized the woods by the side of the road. At last, he dismounted and strode into the trees with Simonov and the crowd close behind him, some carrying shovels collected along the way. After a short distance through the underbrush, the old man stopped and raised his arm.

The crowd stopped and waited. Ahead stood two ancient oaks known locally as Peter and Paul. After a moment's hesitation, the old man pointed at Paul, the right-hand tree, and at a spot at the base of the trunk. Without a word, the men with the shovels set to work. The ground was hard, but they dug as quickly as they could. The crowd held its breath. The only sounds came from the shovels and Simonov cracking his knuckles nervously.

Here, Sirin interrupted his story. "What do you think they found, Mr. Ganelon?" he asked.

Without hesitation, the detective answered, "They found nothing."

The confidence man smiled from ear to ear and continued, "When they dug down about four feet and even the old man was beginning to become apprehensive, they struck metal. The diggers dropped their tools. They dug with their hands and uncovered the lid of a metal box. They hoisted it up onto the lip of the hole. As the crowd leaned forward, Simonov stepped up to the box, wiped his palms on his shirt, crossed himself, and opened the lid.

"Ah, Mr. Ganelon, you should have seen it! What diamonds and rubies! What gold plate and fat gold coins marked with the image of an ancient tsar!"

"Don't mock me, Sirin," warned the detective, scowling darkly.

"I swear it's the truth, Mr. Ganelon," insisted the storyteller. His expression was earnest but his eyes twinkled at the distress this turn in the narrative had caused his listener. Sirin lay a hand on his heart. "Saint-Germain the Deathless certainly knows real gold and jewels when he sees them."

The detective grunted. Gesturing the man to return to the woods

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just beyond Brosno, he lay his brooding cheek on a mittened hand and listened.

At the sight of the marvelous treasure, the crowd knelt down among the trees and let the old man lead them in prayer. Afterward, Simonov was the first one to his feet, his eyes bright. "Brothers and sisters, we must have a celebration," he announced. "Tell the owner of the vodka shop what you have seen here. Tell him Simonov wants everyone to eat and drink and Simonov will pay. Fetch the musicians and tell them Simonov will pay."

With a happy shout, the crowd surged back to town. The old man, Sirin, and few others remained to watch while four stout neighbors hoisted the treasure up onto Simonov's wagon. Simonov hired them to escort him to the police station in the next village where the box would be secure until the bank opened in the morning. Sirin and the old man accompanied the wagon back through Brosno, where the celebration had already begun. As they passed Pugachev watching impassively from horseback, Simonov took off his hat and waved it in triumph under the moneylender's nose.

The old man stopped in the square and let the wagon go on without him. Sirin stopped, too. He couldn't take his eyes off this ancient stranger. For Sirin there was only one explanation for the recovery of the treasure: the old man was indeed the Wandering Jew.

"He was the original of whom I was only a dim copy, Mr. Ganelon."

The detective snorted.

But Sirin continued undaunted.

"I watched the old man withdraw a bit from the revelers," he said. "He stood in the spreading shadows beneath the oak, his foot tapping to the fiddle and guitar. Then at last the church bell tolled as if admonishing him to continue his endless wandering. With a considerable effort, he turned his back on the celebration and headed out of the village, stopping only to inquire of an old woman hurrying to evening prayer the way to the village where the church with the bleeding ikon of St. Basil stands.

" 'A sign points the way at the crossroads,' she said.

" 'Alas, I am an ignorant man who cannot read.'

" 'Then take the road to the left.'

"So the old man set off," said Sirin, "and I followed at a distance, still reluctant to let this miracle vanish from my sight, still convinced I was in the presence of the Wandering Jew. But rounding

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a bend in the road, I saw the moneylender ride out of a stand of trees. They spoke briefly and some banknotes were passed down to the old man. Just then, the drunken songs of Simonov and his companions could be heard as they returned armed with vodka from the neighboring village. We all stepped off the road to let them pass in the growing twilight."

Sirin stopped and looked at the detective. "But how could the man be a fraud if the treasure was real?"

The outskirts of St. Petersburg were rushing up on them. Ganelon had drawn out his watch again as if the time were important. In fact, there was the faded picture of a woman inside the watch case, the woman who was not his wife. It comforted the detective to hold the timepiece, stroke the case with his thumb, and think of her and a love forbidden because he was not of royal blood. But Sirin was waiting for an answer. Ganelon stuffed the watch away.

"Remember there was a historical treasure," he said. "But we are also dealing with a simple case of collusion between the old man and the moneylender to obtain Simonov's farm. However, unless I'm mistaken, there's more to your story."

"There is indeed," admitted Sirin. "When Simonov passed by, the moneylender and the old man came back onto the road and parted company. Pugachev returned to town while I followed the old man to the crossroads. There something strange happened."

Ganelon nodded. "Instead of turning left, he turned right."

"Correct," said the amazed Sirin. "That set me thinking. So I returned to the two oaks. The shovels were still in the hole under Paul. I took one and began to spade around under Peter. I quickly found a place where the digging was easy. In a few minutes I had uncovered an iron box. I brought the box to the surface and opened it. I suppose you'll know what I found."

"Glass diamonds and a fake gold bar or two," said Ganelon. "And some gold coins even the Sobiakin gang wouldn't have tried to pass. But good enough to deceive a bunch of peasants."

"More or less, yes," said Sirin. "But what does it all mean?"

"It means that a man walking east will have the morning sun on his right cheek not his left," said Ganelon. "It means that somewhere Pugachev and the old fraud crossed paths. Impressed by the man's Wandering Jew impersonation, the moneylender conceived of a scheme to get his hands on Simonov's land. Of course, the old man insisted Pugachev bury a counterfeit treasure to get him out of the village unbloodied. It never occurred to Pugachev that the unlettered

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old man might not even know his right hand from his left. Nor did it occur to him when he chose to bury the fake treasure beneath the landmark oak named Peter that two hundred years before the real treasure had been buried beneath the one named Paul. There is your supernatural for you."

"I suppose," said Sirin half heartedly, for he really didn't want to be convinced. He sat looking out the window for a few moments. "But suppose he was the Wandering Jew?" he insisted. "When the godless moneylender approached him with the scheme to bilk the good farmer, suppose the old man decided to act on Simonov's behalf? So he led the farmer to the real treasure, not the false one?"

"Then why did he take Pugachev's money? Why did he turn right instead of left at the crossroads?"

"Suppose he decided on the spot to give that tainted money to the Orphanage of Our Lady at Vyra," said Sirin. "That would have meant turning right at the crossroads."

"I cannot forbid such a conclusion," said Ganelon. "But if you've grown so romantic since last we met, then I fear for your future in the world of crime." The detective shrugged abruptly. "But then, why should I worry? With your winning ways, you could make your fortune selling legitimate stocks."

The thickets of buildings grew denser by the moment as the train sped into the heart of St. Petersburg. The confidence man drew on his excellent gloves. "Ah, Mr. Ganelon—" he smiled with a wistful shake of his head "—anyone can sell stock in a real company. But the man who buys from me buys a share in my dreams."

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ELLERY QUEEN'S
MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME BEAT

by R. E. PORTER

FANZINE UPDATE: Mystery fan magazines continue to appear, and despite their limited budgets some of them can be quite good. I'm especially impressed by the year-end annual issue of *The Thieftaker Journals,* devoted to hard-boiled fiction in all forms. The 24-page magazine includes articles on female private eyes, TV's Remington Steele, and Mickey Spillane, as well as reviews of several current hard-boiled novels. Best of all is a new Dan Fortune story by Michael Collins, marking the first use of fiction in this fanzine. Subscription information may be obtained from editor and publisher Paul Bishop, 31 Tahquitz Drive, Camarillo, CA 93010.

The Drood Review of Mystery is a well produced eight-page newsletter with reviews and news of forthcoming books. Subscription rate for the monthly is $9.00 a year, from editor Jim Huang, The Drood Review, Box 8872, Boston, MA 02114. (In March *The Drood Review* presented a Boston Mystery Festival with author Jane Langton as guest of honor. Let's hope it becomes an annual event.)

We also have word of a new mystery newsletter devoted to Ed McBain's 87th Precinct series, though we haven't yet seen a copy. Called the *87th Precinct Report,* it's available at $4.00 a year from editor Russell Hultgren, Apt. 12, 701 Dondee Drive, Manhattan, Kansas 66502.

REVISIONS: Since the publication of Allen J. Hubin's revised and enlarged bibliography, *Crime Fiction, 1749–1980,* a few months back, we've learned that several other key reference books in the mystery field are undergoing revisions. *Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers* will publish a new edition in 1985, containing entries on dozens of additional authors as well as updated information on the holdovers. Jacques Barzun and Wendell Hertig Taylor are updating their indispensable reader's guide, *A Catalogue of Crime,* and revisions will include the addition of more than two hundred reviews of old and new

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books which the authors have published in *The Armchair Detective.* From England comes word that Julian Symons is updating another indispensable volume, his 1972 Edgar-winning history of the detective and crime novel, *Mortal Consequences.*

BEST-SELLERS: What is it that turns a mystery or intrigue novel—especially one featuring a series character—into a best-seller? Certainly a successful television or movie series doesn't hurt. This and other aspects of best-selling mayhem are examined by J. Kenneth Van Dover in his forthcoming book, *Murder in the Millions,* which focuses on the careers of three of the best-selling mystery writers of all time—Erle Stanley Gardner, Mickey Spillane, and Ian Fleming. The book will include illustrations from the film versions of the authors' works, and it's due from Ungar later this spring.

ROLE-PLAYING GAMES: Blade, producer of role-playing adventure games, has added to its list with *Stormhaven,* a game to be played in conjunction with its *Espionage* or *Mercenaries, Spies & Private Eyes* game systems. *Stormhaven* consists of two booklets, one describing the people and places in the adventure, with sample scenarios, and the other containing maps for the island setting and its buildings. Also included are 23 cardboard figures of the major characters in the adventure. The package sells for $9.95, and further details may be obtained from Blade, PO Box 1210, Scottsdale, AZ 85252.

MYSTERY OMNIBUSES: Avenel Books, hardcover reprint line sold mainly through bookstore chains and by mail order, has added two new mystery-suspense omnibuses priced at $7.98 each. They are *Alistair MacLean: Six Complete Novels* and John P. Marquand's *Mr. Moto: Four Complete Novels.* They're unbeatable bargains at that price. And in England, Heinemann/Octopus has published the fiftieth volume in its famous omnibus series—*Dick Francis,* containing five of his best-selling mystery novels.

COMING ATTRACTIONS: John Kramer, sociology professor at the State University College at Brockport, NY, and his son, John Kramer III, have authored *College Mystery Novels,* an annotated bibliography of 632 American and British mysteries set on college campuses. Garland will publish it this spring.

Sinda Gregory's *Private Investigations: The Novels of Dashiell Hammett* will be published this spring by Southern Illinois University Press, with an Introduction by Francis M. Nevins, Jr.

Gregory Mcdonald's seventh Fletch novel, *Carioca Fletch,* finds the popular sleuth in Brazil at carnival time. It's due as a paperback original from Warner Books in April.

Norman Mailer's mystery novel, *Tough Guys Don't Dance,* due from Random House in the fall, will appear first as a four-part serial starting in the July issue of *Vanity Fair.*

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

He says he waits and watches, playing his own hunch, and then pounces—a Russian who would serve as the spiritual descendant of dogged police inspector Petrovich in Dostoevski's *Crime and Punishment.* He is Arkady Renko, Chief Investigator of the Militia in today's Moscow. (The Militia is the city's domestic police arm, responsible for all crime which does not involve either foreigners or politics, the domain of a sister organization, the KGB.) Arkady is the central character of Martin Cruz Smith's novel, *Gorky Park,* a best-seller which has been translated into an even better film—moody and dark and throbbing with suspense.

In *Gorky Park* we prowl the claustrophobic underside of a contemporary Russian city, but even though the crimes we try to unravel reach to high government circles it is in no sense a political or espionage thriller. Instead, the film pulses with the life of the city itself: its somber, winter streets and squares, where snow is continuously being swept into the gutters; its markets and cafeterias; its twisting side lanes and endless alleys. It is a canvas brooding and sinister yet rich with the details of ordinary life, as if done by a Slavic Hogarth. (Remarkable attempts were made to "dress" whole sections of the city of Helsinki as the Soviet Union.) But this film is not just an Intourist travelogue, it is a crackling, devious mystery: policeman Arkady must investigate the discovery of three bodies buried in the snow of a city park quite close to the Kremlin. The faces of all three corpses have been cut away to prevent identification.

Arkady must uncover the reason for these murders and mutilations, and his probe takes him to many levels of Soviet society, from black-market dens to the elegant spas of the high bureaucracy. As he becomes more deeply involved, his path crosses that of a suave American businessman, Osborne, who is allowed frequent entry into Russia because he deals in sable pelts, the world's most expensive fur. (Russia has a monopoly on sable furs, going to great pains to keep the animal from ever being taken out of the country to breed.) Arkady slowly becomes convinced that Osborne is personally responsible for the deaths in Gorky Park, but what could be the motive? The reason, when we discover it, is both unique and stunning, pulling us to a climax across the border to Sweden that is heart-pounding with excitement and quite touching in its final moments.

William Hurt, who plays the determined police officer, is first-rate—but then he has been that in his previous films, nearly all of

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them thrillers. He was the young scientist in *Altered States* who cast himself back into his own primal state to stalk a nightmare world —his first starring role. In *Eye Witness,* he was the moody Vietnam veteran who fixes his attentions on a glamorous television reporter, on a single night meeting both her and murder. He was at his most intriguing as the sleazy young Florida lawyer in *Body Heat,* whose involvement with a restless wife leads to the husband's death and a twisty surprise ending—Larry Kasdan's wonderful reworking of a *Double Indemnity* plot. The atmosphere in that film was wet with tropical decay; in *Gorky Park* it is chilly and wintry, heavy and Russian. Hurt makes both worlds his own, giving splendid range to the introspective, stoic, insular Arkady, very much a citizen of a confining, regulated society dealing harshly with crime and punishment. You will find a visit to *Gorky Park* fascinating and rewarding.

Scarface, another recent crime melodrama, is so outrageous as to be operatic, a lush contemporary retelling of the 1932 Howard Hawks classic. But the former film was itself an updating, the incest and familial murders of Paul Muni's Italian gangster world being firmly grounded in the history of the Borgias. Now the central character is a Cuban, Tony Montana, expulsed from Castro's prisons to join the boat migration to American shores, who latches onto the thriving Miami cocaine traffic to become a criminal aristocrat.

Al Pacino, who previously worked both sides of the crime street as a bankrobber in *Dog Day Afternoon* and a cop in *Serpico,* is splendid as the scrappy, ambitious thug, articulating his own amoral vision of the American Dream: "I should have come here ten years ago. I would have been a millionaire. I would have had a boat, a house, a car . . . First you get the money. When you got the money, then you get the power."

Tony's rise to power is realistically told and absorbing. The final toppling of his empire, however, is bizarre and far too bloody. The film will never rival Pacino's *The Godfather,* but the criminal portrait that is *Scarface* cuts deep and sure.

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INTERVIEW: JEAN DARLING (2)

This is the conclusion of an interview that began in the March issue.

EQMN: Who is this wonderful Aunty Poppy we've been hearing about from across the water?

DARLING: In December 1979, Val Joyce, one of Ireland's best disk jockeys, had a party where I met the producer of Poparama, Kevin Hough. He asked me if I wrote children's stories. I told him I wrote for

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Listen with Mother on BBC. He suggested I send him a few stories, and when I did he asked me to read them as well as write them. And so, as Aunty Poppy, I've been on RTE Radio 2 twice weekly since February 1980. Kevin produced a cassette of my stories for Christmas 1982 (RTE/PICKWICK) on which I read and sing the stories and musical rhymes I write. And a little fish story in book form has also been let loose on the unsuspecting public, written and illustrated by me.

EQMN: You're able to write in several genres and for various age groups. Do you favor any one form?

DARLING: I think mysteries and children's stories are basically the same in construction. Horror fantasy is a bit different and I like to wander strange paths in fancy. But whatever I'm into at the moment is my favorite.

EQMN: In retrospect, though—of your published works so far, do you have a favorite?

DARLING: Yes. A horror fantasy I wrote long ago called "Comb My Hair, Please Comb My Hair." It was finally published in *Whispers III* last year. At the time I wrote it I never thought anyone would publish it, but just so I'd know what it would look like if luck ever came my way I had a reduced photocopy made, which I bound together like a book. This gave me great pleasure. It was something to dream on, something tangible to cling to until *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* accepted my first story in 1975.

EQMN: You sew and crochet and make all kinds of lovely things. Do you like to cook as well?

DARLING: I enjoy cooking—but not cleaning up. I'm told I'm a good cook and have fun making all sorts of dishes—Indian, Chinese, Japanese, French, Italian, Mexican, and various concoctions on the spur of the leftovers and spices available—like garlic and garlic and garlic. I wouldn't be safe from vampires for any length of time if wreaths of garlic were my only protection.

My catholic tastes in food come from my mother, who used to eat in a different-nationality restaurant every night when we were in New York City. Happily, my son is equally gregarious foodwise. I've always felt sorry for ham-and-egg and apple-pie people. Eating is something we spend a lot of time and money doing—we should thoroughly enjoy every minute of each savory morsel.

EQMN: If you were to do a pie graph of how you spend your week, how would you divide the time you spend on so many diverse activities?

DARLING: Far from being pie-like, one as compulsive as I am lives life in lumps of getting writing written, paintings painted, knitting knitted, etc. Impatience to see the finished product drives each project to completion. Then it can be put aside for repairs at a later day when I am more objective.

EQMN: Do you like to travel?

DARLING: I was born with wanderlust and the only place I want to go is everywhere I haven't been. It would be sad to die without

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seeing all of this world we live in—all that's still available.

EQMN: Reflecting on your happiest moments, what do you think makes you happy?

DARLING: I wake up happy every morning and my spirits don't flag until the postman passes without stopping. When something desperately needed comes out of the blue, like the help I received when I was trying to become an author—that makes me happy.

EQMN: What makes you sad?

DARLING: Having someone angry with me when I don't know why, so I can't try to make amends.

EQMN: If you had a number of lives to live, how would you spend the others?

DARLING: There's enough to worry about trying to live the life I've been given without pondering what could happen if I were given X number of replays. And anyway, given my nature, talent, and character, in all probability the whole shooting match would end the same. No, I wouldn't want to come back and try again even if I were given the chance.

One thing, though—I would have liked to have lived in what I fancy Vienna was like in the last century.

EQMN: You have an uncommonly fine and interesting value system. What do you especially value?

DARLING: I value trying to achieve a goal. As sometimes the ladder is high and has many rungs, little self-set triumphs along the way ease the climb. I value friends made on the way up, not the ones snared by the heady aroma of success. I value the fact that once I almost died. This knowledge and the feeling of having life slip away like water through my fingers heightened my awareness that the gift of life should be enjoyed each day without looking either forward or backward. I don't mean the future shouldn't be considered, but that it shouldn't be dwelt upon to the detriment of the present.

I value being aware that death *can* happen to me and being able to admit when I'm afraid. I value the freedom that so few of us can enjoy any more when doors have to be treble-locked and one can't venture out after dark without fear as a companion. I dislike the cavalier theft of that irreplaceable possession, time, by bad planning or lack of caring.

As for material things, I'd like to have it all, of course—I'm human. But Priorities is the name of the game. Aren't your teeth better if you don't eat all that lovely, gooey chocolate cake?

"Q"

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THE JURY BOX

by ALLEN J. HUBIN

Mysteries are not much reprinted in hard covers in this country, alas; the field is thus left to paperbacks. The noblest of current softcover mystery reprinting programs, in terms of size, quality, and range, are those of Harper Perennial, Dell, and Penguin, whose regular offerings are well worth the attention of every mystery reader.

The Perennial program impresses me most, with its emphasis on classical detection, its informed selection criteria, and its persistence in keeping its titles in print. Well represented authors include Nicholas Blake, Andrew Garve, Cyril Hare, Michael Innes, and Julian Symons. In addition, I've just sampled, with considerable pleasure, recently published works by John Welcome and S. B. Hough.

The Welcome novel is from 1958: *Run for Cover* ($2.95), one of five he wrote about Richard Graham, who went from postwar spying to amateur steeplechasing. Here a publisher asks Graham to review a manuscript by someone called Rawle. But Rawle, who once tried to kill Graham, is reliably known to have died five years before. Then the manuscript disappears, and Graham—hatred and determination in his heart—goes to France to lay a ghost and stumbles into a deadly international conspiracy. Polished writing, solid adventure.

The S. B. Hough, which happens also to be in its first U.S. appearance, is *Sweet Sister Seduced* ($2.95), from 1968, one of several about Inspector John Brentford. This is an absorbing, structurally innovative tale inquiring into whether Mr. Milham murdered his wife. Brentford spends the whole of a night hearing Milham's story. Alternate chapters carry the narrative from first accusation (by a nonconformist preacher) to the curious nocturnal interview.

Dell's major contribution to mystery reprinting is the Murder Ink/Scene of the Crime series named for specialist bookstores in New York and California, with the 67 titles appearing to date selected by the respective proprietors. The latest Murder Ink novel is *Arrow Pointing Nowhere* ($3.25), the seventh of 16 novels by Elizabeth Daly (1878–1967) about investigator Henry Gamadge. This one dates from wartime 1944, and celebrates a culture (gentlemanly, courtly, proper) long—I fear—extinct. Gamadge is the recipient of cryptic notes, tossed in crumpled paper from the Fenway mansion on New York's East Side. The notes seem to call for help; he arranges to visit the house. Who is his client, and who is he to protect? He fails to prevent death—murder?—but is on hand to deliver the author's clever and surprising denouement.

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Some look upon Margery Allingham (1904–1966) and her Albert Campion tales, especially the earlier ones, with disdain, labeling them trivial comedy and Campion a lightweight bore. I beg to differ. True, early stories emphasize humor and Campion is sketched rather broadly. But for me the wit is effective and enjoyable and Campion's depth and humanity are there to be found. Recently revived titles include *More Work for the Undertaker* (Penguin, $3.50) from 1948, *Sweet Danger* (Penguin, $3.50) from 1933, and *Dancers in Mourning* (Bantam, $2.50) from 1937; all are well worth tracking down.

Pocket Books is reissuing some of the 26 Pam and Jerry North novels by Frances (1896–1963) and Richard (1898–1982) Lockridge. The latest, *Death of an Angel* ($2.95), from 1955, has a New York theatrical setting. The show's largest investor announces his engagement to its show-stopping star and her immediate retirement. That would doom the play, so when the angel is murdered suspects abound. A further killing takes place, plus that—unforgiveably—of a cat, and Pam is sure she knows whodunit. An entertaining affair, in the characteristic clipped style of the authors.

Turning to hardcover, *The Portland Murders* by screenwriter-TV producer Charles Larson (Doubleday, $11.95) brings back TV producer Nils-Frederik Blixen for the third time. The author, a Portland resident, returns Blixen to *his* hometown, where his testimony is wanted concerning 30-year-old bones found under a driveway. Thirty years dates back to Blixen's high-school-graduation party, a beery, sexy event which resulted, it now appears, in a knife in someone's ribs. The police candidate for killer is a lady at whose younger feet Nils had swooned. Now, prodded by faces unseen for three decades, by words and actions, Blixen's memory begins to reveal horrendous bits and pieces—almost the face of a killer. Larson's series about Blixen is a fine one and this novel is just plain excellent in every way.

I'll wager John Sherwood has never been better than in his eleventh suspense novel, *Death at the BBC* (Scribners, $12.95). This is a fascinating story, so emphatically set in 1937 as to read like authoritative fact instead of fiction. The BBC is enormously sensitive to its image; its employees contort to avoid dismissal for tarnishing it. One of its leading producers, in danger of a career-ending divorce, also seems the target of a vengeful Irishman. Next comes murder, and the police must push behind the BBC's bland and innocent façade. Then the narrative inverts, and we watch the guilty squirm as the scheme begins to come apart. Don't miss this one.

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a *NEW* short story by

JACK RITCHIE

The housesitter visibly occupied the premises to discourage break-ins and vandalism. He did not, he explained, do windows . . .

THE GHOST OF CLAUDIA McKENNY

by JACK RITCHIE

I am a professional housesitter, and this promised to be my biggest job.

Usually I deal directly with the home owners themselves. However, in this case my negotiations were with the representative, Mr. Howell.

He took me on a tour of the huge McKenny house. "Do you believe in ghosts?"

Naturally I blinked at the question. "No."

He nodded approvingly. "Good. You've got a sensible head on your shoulders. In 1829, Claudia McKenny was to be married in this very house. But on the morning of the wedding, her intended did not make an appearance. It has been claimed that she died of a broken heart and that her ghost has glided consistently about the grounds ever since, searching for her missing lover—which seems rather futile to me, since he was last seen in Cincinnati."

Howell then proceeded to get down to the nitty-gritty of the situation. "The present members of the McKenny family are now in Europe and have been there for nearly two years. Neither I nor apparently they have any idea of when they will return. When they left, they dismissed all of their servants, leaving only a caretaker on the premises. He quit last week."

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I supplied the expected question. "Why?"

Howell smiled faintly. "He maintained that he saw the ghost of Claudia McKenny, and apparently it disturbed him."

I absorbed that without damage and moved on to another point. "I am a housesitter. In short, I visibly occupy the premises to discourage break-ins and vandalism. I do not, to put it another way, do windows."

He was aware of that. "I have engaged a firm which specializes in servicing estates at regular monthly intervals. You will not have to lift a finger."

I have been a housesitter for nearly three years.

Previous to that, I was a contented and newly appointed assistant professor of Latin at our state university. However, the general economic picture forced some budgetary cuts in my department, and since I was the most junior member I became a casualty.

There doesn't seem to be much of a call for assistant professors of Latin these days, and as time passed so did my unemployment benefits and I was faced with virtual starvation and certain eviction from my apartment.

It was at this point that a professor with whom I was on good terms was about to set upon his sabbatical leave. Since he would be away for one year, he was chary about leaving his home unoccupied and equally uneasy about renting it to absolute strangers.

He approached me and offered me the use of his house, plus a nominal sum, if I would establish residence there while he was away. I eagerly jumped at the opportunity.

I spent a most pleasant year in his house, during which time I came to a decision. Until such time as the university would be able to re-employ me, I would adopt a new profession. Housesitting.

I began my new career in the university community, housesitting for faculty members off on weekends or vacations, but as time went by and my reputation for honesty and dependableness increased, I expanded my horizons and sat a variety of homes all about the city. The McKenny residence was my first venture into the countryside.

Howell paused in front of one of the family portraits on the wall. "That's Claudia McKenny."

I studied her likeness. A fairly good-looking woman of twenty or so, but the artist had caught, or inadvertently put, something in her eyes that made one wonder whether there was not some justification for fleeing to Cincinnati.

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We left the house and examined the grounds, eventually reaching a line of garages under what appeared to have been servants' quarters. Howell opened one of the garage doors and I saw a collection of Lincolns, Cadillacs, and one orange, somewhat battered Volkswagen.

"You have the use of the Volkswagen," Howell said.

I didn't argue the point. It was certainly better than having to use the bicycle leaning against the wall.

After Howell left, I went back to the main house and chose one of the smaller bedrooms on an upper floor as my headquarters and unpacked my two suitcases.

Usually on my first night in a new place, I experience insomnia, and that night was no exception. At eleven-thirty I got out of bed and went to the window.

The night was moonlit and misty—really rather beautiful. I stood there, admiring the vista, when a movement at the edge of a line of trees caught my eye.

What could it be? I wondered. Some animal lurking about? A deer, perhaps? One could logically expect something like that out here in the country, couldn't one?

In the distance I could hear a farm dog howling. Or at least I thought it was a farm dog. I am somewhat city-oriented and not a connoisseur of howling.

I saw the movement again. Not in the same spot, but farther down the line of trees. Evidently, whatever it was was making its way to the rear of the grounds and would appear in the small patch of open ground in a moment or two.

I watched the shadowy progress, expecting to see a deer.

It was not a deer.

It was the figure of a woman in a long dress and she glided through the shin-high ground fog and into the shadows again.

I took a deep breath of reason. Obviously it was just someone cutting across the grounds. Trespassing. Someone in a long dress. At eleven-thirty at night. Going someplace.

I quickly adjusted the blinds, shutting out the night, and went back to bed.

I lay there trying not to think of what I was thinking. All I had seen was a perfectly normal *human* being, in a long dress, gliding across the lawn.

Not *gliding*. *Walking*. Yes, definitely *walking*.

Toward morning I finally fell asleep . . .

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After a late breakfast, I found myself strolling the grounds and accidentally found myself at the spot where I had seen the woman walking across the lawn.

I found no trace of footprints, but then one really couldn't expect to find footprints on the grass.

I decided to go to the nearest town to supplement my meager supply of groceries and went to the garage for the Volkswagen. When I pushed open the overhead doors, I paused and frowned. There was something different here. But what was it? It took me a few moments to realize what it was.

The bicycle was missing.

I sighed heavily. I really should have locked the garage door before I went to bed. Someone—probably one of the local juvenile delinquents—had taken advantage of the night to steal the bike.

I would have to report the theft to the authorities, of course, but I didn't remember the bicycle's license-plate number, or even if it had one. Nor was I at all sure I could describe the bike. It was blueish, I thought. Possibly green. I *did* remember that it had one of those wire baskets in front of the handlebars.

I drove to a small town three miles down the road and located the office of the county sheriff. He expressed no optimism that the bicycle could be recovered, especially since my description seemed to lack specifics, but he promised to do his best.

When I returned to the McKenny garage, I stared.

The bicycle was now back in place, leaning against the wall. Evidently the thief—after a bit of joy riding—had decided to return it.

I was satisfied with that explanation until something occurred to me. How had the bicycle thief managed to put the bike back into the garage? I distinctly remembered that I had locked all of the doors before I went to town.

I was still pondering that when I heard a squeak from one of the floor-boards overhead. Was the thief upstairs in the seervants' quarters at this very moment?

I pulled down the garage door again, but this time from the inside. He would think I had left. I took up a stand behind one of the Cadillacs and waited.

After five minutes, I heard the squeak again and it seemed to be making its way to a door at the head of the stairway.

The doorknob turned and the bicycle thief—

I blinked. Bicycle thiefess?

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She had raven hair, was perhaps in her middle twenties, and wore jeans. She also had violet eyes.

She descended the stairs and went to the bike. Was she about to steal it again?

I leaped out of hiding. "Ah ha!" I said fiercely.

She was startled, of course, but when she saw it was me, she seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. "Oh, it's only you. I thought you'd gone back to the house."

"Of course it's only me," I said indignantly. "I see that you're about to steal the bicycle again."

She glanced at it. "It's *my* bike!"

I smiled tightly. "Then what is *your* bike doing in this locked garage?"

She thought about it and then shrugged. "I guess I might as well start from the beginning. You see, I have this Master's degree in English."

Automatically I topped that. "*I* have a Ph.D."

"Golly," she said. "How terrific for you." She studied me. "Well, anyway, there I had my Master's, but there were no teaching openings. So I took a job here as a maid—temporarily, I kept hoping. I worked about six months, and then the McKennys decided to close down the place and go to Europe. They fired everybody and hired a caretaker.

"I moved back to town, but after a while I ran out of unemployment compensation and got evicted from my apartment. So there I was on the streets with practically nothing but my bicycle.

"So I decided that since nobody was really living here but the caretaker, and he lived in the main house, why couldn't I just sneak back here and live in the servants' quarters until things in the job market got better. I knew where I could find the keys and I wasn't harming anyone."

She indicated the bike. "I use it to get to town. I have a part-time job at the library. It pays for my groceries, but not much more."

I smiled grimly. "You managed to frighten off the caretaker, didn't you?"

"I didn't mean to. I did my best to stay out of sight and walked around the grounds only after dark. But I guess he saw me and assumed it was the McKenny ghost."

"Of course he would. Especially if you wore a long dress and glided across the lawn."

"Long dress? Oh, you mean you saw me last night? No, that was

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a raincoat. It was drizzling, you remember, and I don't have a raincoat of my own. So I used one left behind by one of the servants. It isn't my size and so I suppose it drags a little."

She sighed. "What are you going to do now? Call the police?"

I thought about that and finally cleared my throat. "Well, maybe we could draw some sort of an imaginary line between the main house and the garages. You stay on your side and I'll stay on mine."

Actually, the imaginary line didn't work out too well. There were numerous infractions as the weeks passed. On both sides.

In August, I got a letter from the university informing me that there was once again an opening in the Latin department. I hesitated until I learned that they also had a job for someone with a Master's in English.

Marianne and I reported for work hand in hand, so to speak.

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

DONALD OLSON

"It's just so wonderful having you back," she told him. "Look, I baked your favorite cake today. Chocolate. Isn't that funny? It's the first baking I've done in weeks. It's almost as if I knew something wonderful was going to happen today!"

The way her eyes feasted on him gave Ernie a sick feeling, brought back memories of the same squirming discomfort he had always felt when she looked at him like that . . .

A PIECE OF CAKE

by DONALD OLSON

From the bus station, Ernie Boyer walked to the Boatlanding, a riverfront hotel as dingy and forbidding in its way as the penal institution from which he had been released less than six hours earlier. He advanced to the bar, dropped his bag beside the stool, and ordered a beer, his first in nine months. As he drained the glass, a hand fell heavily on his shoulder. He recoiled, then quickly relaxed as Caz slid onto the stool alongside him.

"Washing the taste of the joint out of your mouth, buddy?"

"It'll take more than one."

Caz ordered two more and offered Ernie a cigarette. "I got us a room. It's a dump but what the hell, for one night."

Relief at the sight of his former cellmate prompted Ernie to tell the truth. "I was afraid you wouldn't be here."

Caz looked hurt. "I promised, didn't I?"

"Yeah, sure, but I thought maybe you and Maureen—you know . . . "

Caz shrugged his big shoulders, glanced at Ernie with the quick, squinty smile that made his rough-handsome face look suddenly older. "Her? I told you, past history. But she came through. I picked

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up an old heap with the bucks she was holding for me. We'll blow this burg in the morning."

"And go where?"

"You know where. It was your idea, remember?"

Ernie took his time on the second beer, savoring it. "You still think we ought to? I mean, I been thinking—"

"Hey, man, no more of that. We made a deal, remember? From now on, I do the thinking. You said it yourself, Ernie. It's a piece of cake. We take a spin up north, do our little thing, and then head straight for the Coast. I got connections there. The Mexican gent, remember?"

"Sure. But it's been a long time. Things could have changed. I haven't heard from the old lady since I was in the Army. Hell, she might even be dead."

"She's not. I checked."

Ernie tried not to show his surprise. "How?"

"I called her. Got the number from long distance. When she answered, I hung up. So it's a long chance, what have we got to lose?"

Ernie agreed, but later in the fleabag room upstairs, waiting for sleep to come, he was beset with doubts. He recalled the dreary, grey days in the joint, the endless talks with Caz, the desire to impress him, to do a little bragging of his own. There was little to brag about: a few petty misdemeanors, the trouble that had got him booted out of the Army, the drug bust in Florida. Nothing to compare with Caz's record, although Caz had talked more about the future than the past, all about California and the Mexican gent, the big score they could make out there. All they needed was stake money, and it was in this regard that Ernie had told Caz about Carl and Hilda Grandin, about the money box in the hidey-hole and what a cake job it would be to snatch it. Only now he wasn't so sure. Or possibly it was no more than a superstitious reluctance to return to the hometown he had been so eager to leave.

It was an old Chevy badly in need of a ring job and new rubber, but it would get them to Fentonville, Caz promised—and if things panned out, they could ditch the junker and pick up a decent set of wheels for the crosscountry jaunt.

The trip north was uneventful except for their being caught in a speed trap outside Richmond. Luckily, Ernie was driving at the time. Caz had a hair-trigger temper and might have hassled the cop, but he'd been snoozing when they were stopped and Ernie had conveyed

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the proper attitude of innocence. He had a face that matched the manner. Not a baby face, but a freshness of countenance that gave no clue to his real character: wide-set blue eyes, a pug nose, slightly protruding ears, curly light-blond hair. The cop had let them go with a warning and Ernie didn't mention the incident to Caz when he woke up. . . .

Caz made few allusions to the purpose of their trip until they were close to the Pennsylvania border. Then he began drilling Ernie. "You know what you're going to tell the old broad, don't you?"

"Sure. I'm just out of the Army and wanted to pay a quick visit for old time's sake before going on to Chicago to look for a job."

"Let's hope she hasn't heard about your little vacation down South."

"No way. I got nobody left in Fentonville."

"She'll wonder why you haven't written."

"I never did. Just a couple of cards from Germany." His hand instinctively felt for the watch on his wrist. He wondered why he'd never pawned or peddled it. Probably because it was the only good thing he'd ever owned. He remembered the day they'd given it to him, the way the old lady's blubbering had embarrassed him. Paul's watch. The one they'd bought for his graduation. How dumb, Ernie had thought at the time, buying a kid a watch for his graduation when he was still in grade school. But that's the way they were, all wrapped up in the kid, living only for him.

Caz was driving now and Ernie found himself reminiscing aloud about the way it had been, as if still trying to penetrate that mystery of the emotions that had linked him to the Grandins.

"They got married late, like in their thirties, you know, and the kid was born five years later. It was like a miracle to them. Their whole lives were centered on him. They gave him everything.

"They gave him a bike, a real fancy job, when he was ten. He had a paper route, and one day when he was coasting down Willard Hill a car slammed into him and he was killed. This was about five years before I knew them. I guess she sort of went out of her mind. It was like the end of the world for her."

Caz had heard it all before, but he didn't interrupt. He guessed the younger man had to keep talking to hide the nervous apprehension that grew more visible the closer they got to their destination.

"She took a shine to me—I didn't know why at first. It was sort of creepy. I'd see her standing there on the porch every day when

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I came by their house on the way home from school. And one day I looked back and damned if she wasn't following me. Pretending not to, you know, but I could tell. Then one day she called to me when I was going by. 'Please, can I talk to you? I've just baked a chocolate cake. Would you like a piece?'

"It was spooky, the way she mooned over me while I was gobbling the cake. There were pictures of the kid—'our little Paul,' she called him—all over the place. She said I was the spitting image of little Paul, and I guess I was, judging from them pictures. I got a paper route and she fussed over me like crazy every time I stopped to collect.

"One day Mr. Grandin gave me ten bucks, said I needed a new pair of sneakers and he hoped I didn't mind his wife making such a fuss over me. It was all because of Paul and how much I reminded her of him. For years after he'd died, she'd been depressed, took no interest in life."

Ernie shook his head at the dashboard. "It was spooky, man. They'd kept all his things—toys, clothes, everything. She started giving me stuff: caps, shirts, shoes. One day even this watch. My old lady got a charge out of it—this was before she latched onto this creep from Cleveland and ran off with him. 'If they knew what a sneaky little devil you are they'd never let you inside their house,' she told me. And one day they dragged out this bike, the one the kid was killed on. The old man had fixed it up and they wanted me to have it. Oh, man, it was creepy."

Caz looked over at him. "Sounds like your face was your fortune, kid. I never had no fairy godparents like that."

"I told you about the treehouse. The one little Paul had started to build in a tree out back and how they wanted me to finish it. And I did, with a little help from the old man. I used to sneak up there sometimes at night and sleep in that treehouse."

"That's when you saw the money box."

"Right. I was perched up there one night and I could see right into the upstairs window. Mr. Grandin came into the spare room and put the light on. I saw him pull out this piece of paneling and reach in and drag out this black-metal box, and unlock the padlock and put some money in the box. After a while I caught on. It happened every Friday night. He got paid on Fridays. I thought a lot about that box. You know, wondering how much money was in it."

Caz laughed. "I'm surprised you never tried to swipe it before now."

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"I did think about it—after I saw what was in it. That was when they gave me the watch. Hilda said they wanted to give me a birthday present. I said it wasn't my birthday and she looked at me sort of funny and said, 'Paul's birthday. Today is Paul's birthday.' We were in his room. The old man had gone into the spare room. I heard him fumbling around in there and then the phone rang and she went down to answer it. It was for him and when he went down to take the call, while they were both downstairs, I went into the spare room. The box was on the floor by the hidey-hole, open.

"I couldn't believe it. I'd never seen so much money—stacks and stacks of bills. Then I heard her coming back up the stairs, so I got out of there. When the old man came back up, they gave me the watch. It must have been in the box.

"Old Hilda used to preach to me about saving money, and one day she told me how Carl's father had lost a lot of money when his bank failed and how Carl didn't trust banks, but he'd made a habit of saving half his pay ever since he started working. I guess they figured their money was safer in that there hidey-hole than in any bank. I used to think what if they both kicked off and nobody ever found that hidey-hole."

"So when did the old man die?" Caz asked him.

"Hilda wrote me a letter when I was in Germany, just before I got kicked out of the Army, telling me he'd had a fatal heart attack. It was the last time I heard from her."

They stopped for lunch at a McDonald's in Breezewood. Across the table, Caz regarded the younger man with a speculative look. "You baffle me sometimes, Ernie. As I get the picture, nobody ever gave a damn about you except this old couple—until you met me, of course. It don't bother you, robbing the old girl of her life savings?"

Ernie's deceptively innocent blue eyes flashed with sullen impatience. "Don't you understand? It was a *game.* They didn't give a damn about *me.* You think I was too dumb to know that? They were pretending. The way she always looked at me—not seeing *me.*

"She'd slip up sometimes. Like she'd say, 'Have another piece of cake, Paul'—half the time not even realizing she'd got the name wrong. They were using me, can't you understand? Oh, sure, I went along with it. Why not? Ten bucks for mowing the lawn. A bike, clothes, food—all those goodies. Suppose dear little Paul hadn't got knocked off his bike and died—you think they'd have known I was alive? Or cared? Sitting there eating that damned chocolate cake

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with her mooning over me, making believe I was *him,* sometimes I felt like screaming at her, 'Look, I'm not *him!* I'm *me,* Ernie Boyer!' So okay, I played her silly game. Now it's time I got paid for it."

The older man's eyes played over Ernie's face. "*If* the box is still there, and *if* the money's still in the box."

Ernie grinned. "You think it will be or we wouldn't be taking this long detour."

Caz nodded. "Habits don't change, especially when you get old. It'll probably be there. If it's not, well, like I said, what have we lost? Just make sure you play it the way we planned. You introduce me as an old Army buddy. We chew the fat with the old girl for a few minutes and then you ask her if you can wash up. While I keep her occupied, you pop up into that room and open the hidey-hole."

"And if it's empty, I come right back down and we split. The sooner the better."

"If you're up there more than five minutes, I'll know you've scored. You slip out through the window with the box, climb down the trellis, and stow it in the car. Then come back through the window and down the stairs the same way. We hang around for a few minutes, say bye-bye, and we're off."

He made it sound so easy Ernie felt ashamed to voice his uncertainties. "Maybe it would be better if we just broke in. Wait till she's asleep—"

"Don't be dumb, Ernie. Why take any fool chances? You said she doesn't know you have any knowledge of the hiding place. When she discovers the box is gone, she'll never dream you had anything to do with it. Just make sure you wipe your prints off anything you touch in that room."

A light rain was falling by the time they reached Fentonville. The town hadn't changed, Ernie said. It was still the same fading industrial town he'd been so happy to leave behind him.

He drove down Crescent Street, showed Caz the shabby house in which he'd grown up, and then up Willard Hill past the Grandin place. That, too, looked the same—a modest, well kept bungalow, shielded from the neighboring houses by a tall, thick hedge of overgrown lilac trees. The trellis rising to the small upstairs side porch looked as sturdy as ever. Yes, thought Ernie, it would be easy, especially on a dark, rainy night.

They checked into a motel on the east side of town, dined in their room on beer and sandwiches, then killed a couple of hours playing

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gin rummy until Caz announced it was time to go calling. The beer had given Ernie just enough of a buzz to quiet his nerves to no more than a ripple of uncertainty as they left the motel and drove across town to Willard Hill.

"There's a light on, she must be home," said Caz, turning into the driveway of the Grandin house. He turned off the engine and put a hand on Ernie's arm. "Your move."

"I wish to hell it was over. I can't wait to get out of this town."

"You soon will be. Just hope you'll be a lot richer than when you arrived."

They rang the bell several times before a light finally came on in the vestibule. Ernie fixed a smile on his face as they waited for the door to be unlocked and unchained.

His smile faltered at his first glimpse of the woman who opened the door and peered out at him. He scarcely recognized her. She looked so much smaller and frailer, her hair was nearly white. They stared into each other's eyes for a long moment before Hilda Grandin's hand sped to her lips.

"Oh, dear Lord, it is, it is! Paul!"

It was ghastly. Ernie found himself sweating in an agony of embarrassment. He wasn't sure what he had expected, but he hadn't been prepared for this. As soon as Hilda Grandin went into the kitchen to make coffee for them he leaned toward Caz and whispered fiercely: "Let's get out of here. Let's just forget the whole thing."

"Don't be a dope. It's a stroke of luck, buddy. She's gone round the bend. She thinks you *are* Paul. Play along with it. Go on out and help her. She looks like she might keel over any second."

"No! I—"

"Go *on*."

In the kitchen, Hilda Grandin was fumbling with the coffeepot, her fingers trembling as she spooned in the coffee.

"Here, let me do that," Ernie said.

She turned to him with an exasperated sigh. "Oh, Paul dear, I'm just no good for anything any more. It's awful to get old. I used to laugh when *my* mother said that, but she was right. I always thought I'd go before your father. He was so well right up to the end— But I mustn't talk like this. It's just so wonderful having you back. Look, I baked your favorite cake today. Chocolate. Isn't that funny? It's the first baking I've done in weeks. It's almost as if I knew something wonderful was going to happen today!"

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The way her eyes feasted on him gave Ernie a sick feeling, brought back memories of the same squirming discomfort he had always felt when she looked at him like that.

"They want me to go into a nursing home, but I won't. I intend to stay here as long as I can. —It won't be much longer now."

"Hey, don't talk that way. You'll soon be feeling better—"

"No, son, I didn't want to say anything in front of your friend, but it won't be long now. Doctors try to fool you, you know, but I made them tell me the truth before I came home from the tests at the hospital. They couldn't operate, you see. I didn't want them to. Not with Carl gone. Oh, no, don't you look at me like that. I don't want you feeling sorry for me. I had a good life. A loving husband and a wonderful son, and now that you're home again I can bear anything."

Ernie wished with all his soul he'd never opened his mouth to Caz about the Grandins and their money box. Everything he'd told Caz about his relationship with the Grandins was true. His awareness of having been no more than a substitute for the beloved Paul had left him with no sense of gratitude for their kindness, no feeling of obligation or affection. Nonetheless, the thought of robbing this dying and deluded old woman filled him with self-loathing. It was impossible. How could he ever live with such a thing?

"Is it okay if I go upstairs and wash up?" he broke into what she was saying. "We've been a long time on the road."

"You go ahead, dear. The coffee will take a few minutes. I'll just slice the cake."

In the other room, he found Caz examining the photographs on the piano. The older man turned. "I can see what you meant. You and the kid must have been dead ringers."

"Look, Caz, it's no good. I can't do it. My God, she's dying. She's only got a few months left."

"So what good's the money going to do her?"

"That's not the point," Ernie whispered harshly. "I said I can't *do* it."

Caz glanced toward the kitchen door and seized Ernie's arm in a brutal grip. "Get a hold of yourself. You've got no choice. You think I dragged us all the way up here just to have you go soft and get cold feet? No way, buddy. This was your idea and by God you're going through with it. Now get upstairs and do your number."

"Caz, please. Can't we just—"

"No! You either do it the way we planned or I'll do it my own way. I mean it, kid. Don't push me."

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There was no mistaking his intentions. Ernie had seen that look on his face more than once in prison. He knew what it meant and that it was hopeless to argue. Without another word, he turned and headed for the stairs. The sooner it was done, the sooner he could be rid of any remorse he might feel, by distance and the money itself—assuming the money box was still there.

As he reached the top of the stairs, Ernie found himself praying it would not be.

The sight of it shocked him. For a long moment he crouched there on his knees, staring at the box with a kind of resentful disbelief. The rain was falling harder on the sloping roof above his head and the murmur of Caz's voice drifted up from below. Briefly, Ernie toyed with the idea of replacing the panel, of going back downstairs and by the barest shake of his head deceiving Caz into believing the enterprise had been a failure. But would Caz believe him now that he had betrayed his distaste for the project? Suppose Caz decided to see for himself. The fear of what he might do if he discovered he had been lied to stayed Ernie's hand from the panel. And in a way Caz was right. Hilda Grandin was dying. Of what use would the money be to her?

With quickening heart, he moved swiftly now, lifting out the box and replacing the panel. He crossed to the light switch and darkened the room before raising the window shade. He stooped to open the window and gazed across the tops of the lilacs to the neighboring house. Its upper rooms were dark.

The rain fell coolly on his flushed and sweating face as he crawled out onto the tiny porch, then lifted out the box. Tucking it under his left arm, he clambered over the rail and got a footing on the trellis. As Caz had predicted, it was all so easy—a piece of cake.

He crouched at the foot of the trellis, listened for a moment, then crept, head low, to the car, eased open the door, and thrust the box into the back seat. He leaned against the car, breathing in a deep, life-restoring draft of damp night air. At the same time, something seemed to expire within him, perhaps that tiny, perishable flame of conscience which had flickered so briefly when he climbed the stairs.

Now, with a singular detachment of mind, he felt himself capable of finishing the job. He would climb back up the trellis, slip through the window, walk down the stairs. He would smile at Hilda Grandin, sit beside her on the sofa, drink a cup of her coffee and eat a piece

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of her chocolate cake. He would say goodbye to her, kiss her on the cheek, promise to return, then go away with Caz to a new life in California. He was what he was. He felt, with a kind of pride and perverse satisfaction, that he had faced the hardest test of his life and had passed it.

He was about to scale the trellis when the unexpected happened. Behind him, beyond the lilac hedge, the furious barking of a dog broke the night's stillness. Ernie froze. A light flashed on over the neighbor's side porch. Through gaps in the branches, Ernie saw a woman step out onto the porch. She seemed to be staring straight at him. He knew there was little chance of her actually seeing him, yet he dared not move as long as she stood there.

He heard her call to the dog and almost at the same instant he heard his own name spoken. It was Caz. "Come on! Get in the car!"

"What is it? What—"

"Shut up. Just get in the car. Move, let's get out of here."

"Are you crazy? That's not the way we—she'd know!"

Caz seized his arm. "She started upstairs after you. Look, I had to do it. Now move!"

Ernie stared at him. "Do what? *What* did you do?" But he knew the answer, read it in Caz's dead-white face, in his eyes that were suddenly the eyes of a stranger.

As Ernie went to brush past him toward the front of the house, Caz blocked his way. "Don't be a fool—She's dead! Get in the car, damn you!"

Ernie allowed himself to be pushed into the car, then moved aside as Caz climbed in behind the wheel. As Caz started the engine, turned on the windshield wipers and headlights, Ernie saw the dog in the driveway—and as Caz wrenched the gear-shift into reverse the woman next door suddenly appeared beside the dog, one hand shading her eyes as she stared into the headlights.

"She's seen us!" Ernie cried. He could sense Caz's indecision, half expected the movement of his arm that would send the car plunging forward instead of back. Instead, with a muttered oath he jammed his foot on the pedal, backed out of the drive, and with a screech of tires on the wet pavement shot down the hill into town. But not before Ernie saw the woman hurry toward Hilda Grandin's back door.

Returning to the motel seemed sheer madness to Ernie. "We can't stay here! She saw the car—it's too risky!"

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"Cool down, Ernie. I know what I'm doing. You did your part. Leave the rest to me. We lay low here tonight, tomorrow we catch a bus out of here, get the first flight out of Pittsburgh. Relax. Nobody can spot the car from the highway."

"We just ditch the car here? For the cops to find?"

"It's not registered in my name, dummy. And that broad didn't get a good look at *us*. Now shut up and let me crack this thing."

The black box lay on one of the twin beds. Caz opened his overnight bag and removed a case of instruments, spread them out on the bed, and bent to the task of opening the box. His fingers betrayed not the slightest tremor. The man's coolness astonished Ernie—he himself was feeling sicker by the minute.

"You planned it this way, didn't you?" he said dully. "Everything. Even killing her."

Caz shot him a scornful glance. "I did her a favor, buddy. I hope somebody does the same for me if I'm ever in that condition. You talk like it was your own old lady I snuffed. You hated her, remember?"

"I never said that."

"I know what you said. Now just pipe down, will you?"

Springing the heavy padlock required more of an effort than Ernie expected. Caz worked patiently at it. Ernie kept tearing his eyes away from the bed and glancing toward the door. He tried to believe he was wrong in imagining what might have happened back at the Grandin house. Perhaps the neighbor hadn't really been suspicious. Perhaps she hadn't actually knocked on Hilda's back door, or become alarmed when she got no response. Perhaps it would be hours, even days before anyone discovered Hilda's body.

Caz uttered a little cry of triumph. "Okay, buddy, it's sprung."

Ernie stood looking down at the box. "Well? What are you waiting for?" Caz said.

With a violent jerk of his hand, Ernie reached down and flipped open the lid. Caz whistled. Ernie gazed with wonder and disbelief at the neatly banded bundles of currency.

"I told you, didn't I?" Caz was euphoric. "Old folks never change their habits. I knew we'd hit paydirt. Talk about cake jobs!"

The unfortunate phrase drew a bitter look from Ernie. He saw in his mind the chocolate cake on Hilda Grandin's kitchen table, heard her voice, tremulous with pleasure: *It's almost as if I knew something wonderful was going to happen today.*

Caz ignored the look on Ernie's face. "Start counting it, buddy.

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I'll have a gander at this other stuff. Might be some negotiable bonds."

Ernie felt a revulsion against touching the money yet was not unaware of what had already, at the sigh of so much cash, started happening inside him—the old familiar process of rationalization. He knew intuitively that somewhere in that process he might even reach the point of condoning the murder Caz had committed to ensure their safety. He began counting the money.

Caz examined and tossed aside papers and documents: property deeds, birth certificates, insurance policies. Presently one such document seemed to capture and hold his interest. Clutching it to his chest he fell back on the bed and howled with laughter. Ernie looked up. "What's so funny?"

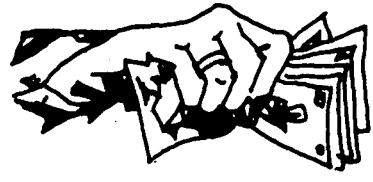
Caz started to hand the paper to Ernie, then, with a playful air of secrecy, folded it and stuck it in his shirt pocket. "Guess."

Ernie frowned. He was in no mood for games. "Come on, what is it?"

"I don't think I'll tell you. You're not in the right mood to appreciate the humor. Maybe when we hit the Coast."

As it happened, they got no closer to the Coast than the bus station in Fentonville, where they were picked up by the police next morning for questioning. Not until months later, midway through the murder trial, did Ernie learn what had provoked Caz's mirth that night at the motel. Not until the prosecutor unfolded the document and read to the court Hilda Grandin's last will and testament, made shortly after her husband's death.

The will in which the already dying woman had bequeathed all her worldly possessions to Ernest Boyer.



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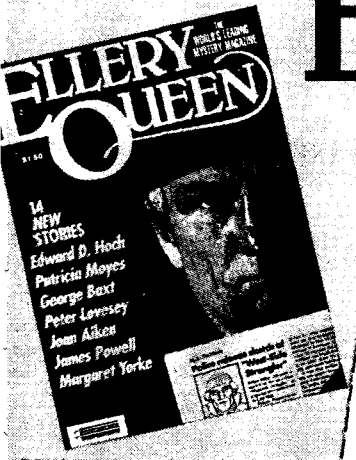

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a *NEW* short story by

MARGARET YORKE

Henry was a frightened man, for he himself would retire at Christmas and after that there would be no escape from Mavis. Now she devoted to the house the energy that had been channeled into her work. She'd always been neat and house proud, but now she was fanatical. How would he manage at home all day, he wondered bleakly, and what would he do for company without the daily colleagues he had spent more time with than with Mavis . . . ?

THE WRATH OF ZEUS

by MARGARET YORKE

The gods indeed were angry, Mr. Dunn thought as he sat on the hotel balcony, a towel wrapped ruglike round his bare, skinny shanks, for it was chilly in the storm. He still wore his blue-cotton holiday shorts, though the warm weather had been replaced by a day that would have seemed normal in an English September. Beyond the oleanders and orange trees that edged the hotel garden and bordered the swimming pool, the Ionian Sea raged grey, dotted with whitecaps, and the beach, once fringed with golden sand, was now drab-brown, riven where torrents of rainwater had poured down from the hills and into the sea. The water, once so clear, was muddied with stirred-up sand.

Poseidon, Mr. Dunn decided as he observed the scene through his binoculars, was demonstrating his power to goad the sea into a wild warning to mere humans.

Earlier, before the storm, the air had been still, heavy with humidity, the sky full of dense purple clouds massing over the mountains across the bay. Then the sky had been rent by bright bars of

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vivid forked lightning, followed instantly by deafening thunder. Zeus, in his majesty, was displaying his authority beneath which mortal man must quail.

Henry and Mavis Dunn were spending a fortnight on this Greek island, which could be reached only by ferry from a larger one with an airport—though the term "airport" seemed a grandiloquent description for the minimal, hutted buildings serving the runway. Each summer the Dunns went abroad, always to somewhere new, and the choice was usually made by Mavis. This year, however, Henry's wishes had prevailed. For years he'd longed to visit this island, steeped in myth and legend. Now it had a large hotel and he had pointed out to his wife that soon it would be fashionable. By visiting it now, they could boast they'd been there before it became part of the regular tourist run. The argument had persuaded Mavis.

Henry woke early each morning and went out onto the balcony of their hotel room to watch the sky grow light under the beneficence of Aurora. As the sky grew brighter, gradually, in all his glory, Apollo would preside over the heavens as the sun shone burningly down. And in the evening the sunsets were magnificent. Even Mavis, drinking duty-free gin on the balcony before dinner, marveled as the huge, fiery orb dropped rapidly behind the distant mountain, taking only just over two minutes from the time its rim touched the mountaintop. For a few more minutes, streaks of orange and gold would light the sky—then it was dark. There was no dusk in those waters.

When the sun went down, Mavis would go into the bedroom and begin her evening toilet, which even on holiday included much grimacing in the mirror as she examined her wrinkles; the patting of cream into her thin cheeks; then the painting of brows on the pale ridge of skin over her small, button-brown eyes. It took time to select which dress to wear before she was ready to go down to the bar to meet their new holiday friends, Eileen and Bill, with whom they now dined each night, to Henry's relief. It helped with conversation.

Mavis had been a pretty girl when Henry first met her, long ago. She'd worked as a typist for a firm for which he was a traveler—representatives, they were all called these days. His nymph, he had christened her then. Even as a young man, Henry had enjoyed reading about ancient times—a schoolmaster had caught his imagination with tales of Mycenae and that had begun it all. "Your silly old books," Mavis would say, referring to the rows

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of volumes he had acquired from second-hand booksellers over the years.

The first time he took her out they went to a concert, but during the interval he discovered that the music bored her so they left. Their next date, and those that followed, had been at the cinema; he'd held her hand in the conspiring darkness, and she'd giggled and squirmed.

They married quickly when war was declared, for Henry was in the Territorial Army and was called up at once. Their brief honeymoon was a disappointment to both, but for the next six years they met rarely. Things would improve after the war, Henry told himself, clasping her resisting body on the station platform before he left for service abroad.

When he returned after four years, Mavis was no longer the plump, curly-haired girl whose photograph he had carried through the western desert and up the leg of Italy and whose rare, stiff letters he knew by heart. But she'd had a tough time, he reminded himself then. Food had been scarce at home; there had been bombs and doodlebugs—though, to be truthful, few had fallen near Mavis, who had found a job in a government department whose offices were moved, for safety, to Wales. It had been dull for her there, though, Henry allowed, and he was grateful that she'd stayed faithful, for so many of his comrades had returned to find that their wives had failed them.

The first years after the war were not easy. Henry had to make up for lost time. He wanted to succeed in the world, and he knew that he must be able to give Mavis the good things of life to preserve their marriage—possessions were important to her.

"I have certain standards, Henry," she'd said, turning down the first flat he'd found—a dark basement one, but cheap.

It would be better when babies arrived, he'd felt. She'd alter then—be warmer, fulfilled. But no babies came, and he seemed to lack the secret of making her content. Her mouth grew thin and hard. She never laughed. He often thought of her girlish giggle, now gone, and sighed.

In time they had a small house, and later a larger one. Since there were no children, Mavis had kept on her job, transferring from one department to another as time went on, and only recently she had retired from a senior position. Henry had done well himself—he'd had to, to keep up with her. He became a keen gardener, thus keeping out of Mavis's way on summer evenings and weekends, and in winter

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he read a great deal. His little library steadily grew and his interest in Greek mythology revived.

Now he realized Mavis was not a nymph and never had been. Watching her as she painted her face, her hair tinted dark brown and permed into frizzy corkscrew curls, he thought she was more like Medusa, with her hard expression and with snakes for hair. He was a frightened man, for he himself would retire at Christmas and after that there would be no escape from Mavis. Now she devoted to the house the energy that had been channeled into her work. She'd always been neat and house proud, but now she was fanatical. How would he manage at home all day, Henry wondered bleakly, and what would he do for company without the daily colleagues he had spent more time with than with Mavis?

Years ago Mavis had turned the small guest bedroom in their house into what she called his den. There he kept his books and his record player and a transistor radio—she didn't want that sort of rubbish cluttering up her living room, she had said. Henry knew he would be spending much of his time in his den in future. All these years, by avoiding each other during the day, they'd managed to maintain brief conversations over the evening meal and even Sunday lunch, but holidays had been difficult until they learned to diffuse their intimacy by making friends with another couple. (It was Henry who always found the holiday friends. He'd get talking in the bar the first evening to someone he'd already picked out on the plane as looking likely. He was aware they weren't the only pair with their problem.)

He'd take up bowling, he thought. It was a pity he'd never played golf, but perhaps it wasn't too late to learn—then he could spend every day at the club. Still, he preferred the idea of adult-education classes. He might learn to paint, or even to speak Greek. But, inevitably there would still be hours at home and when he thought about the future, Henry panicked.

Among the holiday visitors on the island, there were some happy couples. Henry looked wistfully at a pair, not young at all, strolling arm-in-arm down the road to the little town, past orchards of pomegranates and swathes of lush bougainvillea, bright hibiscus, and trails of brilliant morning glory. Nature approved of passion, he sighed, knowing little about it. There were nymphs to be seen, too: lovely young girls who lay, almost naked, stretched out on the beach, their oiled limbs surrendering to the sun. When he went into the

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sea for his swim he met others emerging, long hair wet against small, neat skulls, curving bodies full of promise. He would watch them covertly, like a schoolboy, for he knew he had missed something wonderful in the arid years of his marriage.

Zeus had had his way with any maiden he fancied, Henry thought enviously. Age was no handicap to a god. Henry's own chest bore a light tufting of grey hair and his legs were still pale despite several days in the sun. Zeus—older than time—would simply transform himself into some irresistible figure before conquering the maiden of his choice. Henry picked out a maiden—well, a damsel—for himself and dreamed of appearing before her in the guise of a Greek hero, with golden curls and muscled torso, to carry her off to a cave, where he would ravish her to their mutual delight. His choice was a fair girl who toasted herself on a sunbed close to the spot where, early every morning, Henry laid out his own and Mavis's towels under a plaited straw shelter on the beach. Here, between the swims which punctuated his day, he could watch the girl from behind the cover of his book.

Eileen and Bill shared the shade of their shelter. Occasionally the two women splashed in the shallows. Mavis was a poor swimmer and Eileen could manage only a gasping breast stroke. Bill would coast up and down with some style but short breath. But Henry swam across the wide sweep of the bay each morning to the headland opposite, almost half a mile. There he would haul himself onto a rock, wary of sea urchins hiding under the seaweed, rest for a while, and swim back, escaping from his companions and occupying time in a manner that was not only good for him but pleasant. Some of the way he would power himself on with a vigorous crawl, but for much of the distance he would swim slowly on his side, gazing at the scenery. Above the rocky hilltops was the vivid blue sky and below were the olive trees on which much of the island's prosperity was founded, silvery grey in the sunlight.

The day before the storm, Eileen and Mavis had spent some hours poking about in the little town while Henry and Bill took a taxi out to a ruined monastery. Eileen, who kept a dress shop in Sussex, didn't care for ruins, and neither did Mavis. The women had enjoyed their day, returning with several parcels. The men had had an agreeable time, too.

Eileen and Bill had an air bed on which Eileen would paddle herself for some distance on the calm blue water. Mavis, encouraged

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to take her turn on the bed, paddled too, and found it was easy enough to move the light mattress and guide it with the movement of her hands. Henry supposed it was safe enough out here where the sea was so calm, though he knew such beds were dangerous in British waters.

Each afternoon, however, no matter how calm and still the sea was in the morning, a sharp breeze blew up and the sailboard riders would come out, their little craft dancing like ballerinas on the small waves. And now there was a storm.

It would pass, Henry thought as he watched the lightning stab the sky and heard the thunder overhead. Calm would return when the gods were appeased. Did they demand a sacrifice? he wondered.

The next day, the storm had died down and the sky was washed clear of cloud. The swimming pool, filled with twigs and sand swept down by the rain, was drained and cleaned. The tourists went down to the beach again to resume their sybaritic routine.

For three more days it was calm and sunny, but then the air grew still and humid once more. The sea was like glass and Henry went off for his morning swim while the good weather held. He struck out strongly across the bay toward his landmark at the tip of the headland and scrambled out for his rest. But he stayed a shorter time than usual when he saw the sky grow darker. As he swam back, a slight swell caught him halfway across the bay. It was like the wash from a boat. He glanced round, expecting to see a water-skier, though he had heard no motor boat. He saw no craft near enough to have caused the movement of the water, which was odd.

He swam on toward the straw-topped shades on the distant beach, putting his head down and going into a powerful crawl that moved him fast through the water, looking up from time to time to make sure his direction was correct. Some way ahead, a good distance from the shore, he saw an airbed, and just as he noticed it a big wave came up behind him, wrapping itself around him. Henry, a good and confident swimmer, rode the wave safely, but he saw it sweep on toward the airbed. The mattress bobbed up with the wave and Henry wondered who was on it and if it was Eileen's bed. He swam on and made out the bright color of Mavis's cerise two-piece swimsuit.

Then another wave caught him, a much bigger one than its forerunner. It engulfed him totally, and when he had swum through it he saw it roll toward the air bed.

Poseidon he pleaded, Poseidon—great god of the sea—free me of

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her. And, as he willed the elements, he saw the air bed, caught by the wave, tip up and throw the woman on it into the water.

As he swam toward the spot, Henry understood what had caused the waves. An earthquake had struck this island years ago, and the area was subject to earth tremors. A tremor somewhere out at sea had made the wave. Drawing nearer, Henry could see a head bobbing in the water. Mavis would panic. She wouldn't be able to swim to the shore and he thought it unlikely that she'd be able to clamber back onto the mattress. He swam powerfully on, and as he drew near another wave came. There was no time to reflect. Poseidon had answered his prayer. Henry took a deep breath and dived into the wave as it bore down on the bobbing head. He grabbed the woman and dragged her beneath the wave with him, forcing her head down and holding it submerged, fighting the natural buoyancy of the salt water to keep her under long enough to make of her the sacrificial offering demanded by the gods, his own lungs bursting with the effort. She struggled and kicked, then finally went limp. At last he surfaced, still holding her. Then he felt Zeus, in vengeance, send a shaft of agony through his own chest.

A man swimming with a snorkel mask and flippers fished the woman's body from the water. Henry was pulled out later, hauled aboard the dinghy that shepherded the sail-board riders.

His death was ruled a massive heart attack while attempting to save a friend—for the woman's body was Eileen's. She had been wearing a cerise swimsuit she had borrowed from the victim's wife. Perhaps, it was conjectured, he had mistaken her for his wife, had been attempting to save his wife.

Mavis received a good deal of sympathy, together with Henry's insurances, which brought with them a very comfortable pension, so that she was able to continue to live up to the considerable standards she had set for them both.

"Q"

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a *NEW* Ehrengraf story by

LAWRENCE BLOCK

Ehrengraf straightened his tie, a stylish specimen showing a half inch of royal-blue flanked by two narrower stripes, one of gold and the other of a vivid green, all displayed on a field of navy. The tie was that of the Caedmon Society, and it brought back memories . . .

Those memories concern Martin H. Ehrengraf's first case, the mercenary and merciless lawyer's debut in the February 1978 issue of EQMM in a story titled "The Ehrengraf Method." One keeps hoping he will change his ways, in the manner of Melville Davisson Post's Randolph Mason, but we're here to warn you that, judging from this story, the chances of that are very, very slim indeed . . .

THE EHRENGRAF NOSTRUM

by LAWRENCE BLOCK

Gardner Bridgewater paced to and fro over Martin Ehrengraf's office carpet, reminding the little lawyer rather less of a caged jungle cat than—what? He doth bestride the narrow world like a Colossus, Ehrengraf thought, echoing Shakespeare's Cassius. But what, really, did a Colossus look like? Ehrengraf wasn't sure, but the alleged uxoricide was unquestionably colossal, and there he was, bestriding all over the place as if determined to wear holes in the rug.

"If I'd wanted to kill the woman," Bridgewater said, hitting one of his hands with the other, "I'd have damn well done it. By cracking her over the head with something heavy. A lamp base. A hammer. A fireplace poker."

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An anvil, Ehrengraf thought. A stove. A Volkswagen.

"Or I might have wrung her neck," said Bridgewater, flexing his fingers. "Or I might have beaten her to death with my hands."

Ehrengraf thought of Longfellow's village blacksmith. "The smith, a mighty man is he, with large and sinewy hands," he murmured.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing important," said Ehrengraf. "You're saying, I gather, that if murderous impulses had overwhelmed you, you would have put them into effect in a more spontaneous and direct manner."

"Well, I certainly wouldn't have poisoned her. Poison's sneaky. It's the weapon of the weak, the devious, the cowardly."

"And yet your wife was poisoned."

"That's what they say. After dinner Wednesday she complained of headache and nausea. She took a couple of pills and lay down for a nap. She got up feeling worse, couldn't breathe. I rushed her to the hospital. Her heart ceased beating before I'd managed to fill out the questionnaire about medical insurance."

"And the cause of death," Ehrengraf said, "was a rather unusual poison."

Bridgewater nodded. "Cydonex," he said. "A tasteless, ordorless, crystalline substance, a toxic hydrocarbon developed serendipitously as a by-product in the extrusion-molding of plastic dashboard figurines. Alyssa's system contained enough Cydonex to kill a person twice her size."

"You had recently purchased an eight-ounce canister of Cydonex."

"I did," Bridgewater said. "We had squirrels in the attic and I couldn't get rid of the wretched little beasts. The branches of several of our trees are within leaping distance of our roof and attic windows, and squirrels have quite infested the premises. They're noisy and filthy creatures, and clever at avoiding traps and poisoned baits. Isn't it extraordinary that a civilization with the capacity to devise napalm and Agent Orange can't come up with something for the control of rodents in a man's attic?"

"So you decided to exterminate them with Cydonex?"

"I thought it was worth a try. I mixed it into peanut butter and put gobs of it here and there in the attic. Squirrels are mad for peanut butter, especially the crunchy kind. They'll eat the creamy, but the crunchy really gets them."

"And yet you discarded the Cydonex. Investigators found the almost full canister near the bottom of your garbage can."

"I was worried about the possible effects. I recently saw a

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neighbor's dog with a squirrel in his jaws, and it struck me that a poisoned squirrel, reeling from the effects of the Cydonex, might be easy prey for a neighborhood pet, who would in turn be the poison's victim. Besides, as I said, poison's a sneak's weapon. Even a squirrel deserves a more direct approach."

A narrow smile blossomed for an instant on Ehrengraf's thin lips. Then it was gone. "One wonders," he said, "how the Cydonex got into your wife's system."

"It's a mystery to me, Mr. Ehrengraf. Unless poor Alyssa ate some peanut butter off the attic floor, I'm damned if I know where she got it."

"Of course," Ehrengraf said gently, "the police have their own theory."

"The police."

"Indeed. They seem to believe that you mixed a lethal dose of Cydonex into your wife's wine at dinner. The poison, tasteless and odorless as it is, would have been undetectable in plain water, let alone wine. What sort of wine was it, if I may ask?"

"Nuit St. Georges."

"And the main course?"

"Veal, I think. What difference does it make?"

"Nuit St. Georges would have overpowered the veal," Ehrengraf said thoughtfully. "No doubt it would have overpowered the Cydonex as well. The police said the wine glasses had been washed out, although the rest of the dinner dishes remained undone."

"The wine glasses are Waterford. I always do them up by hand, while Alyssa put everything else in the dishwasher."

"Indeed." Ehrengraf straightened up behind his desk, his hand fastening upon the knot of his tie. It was a small precise knot, and the tie itself was a two-inch-wide silk knit the approximate color of a bottle of Nuit St. Georges. The little lawyer wore a white-on-white shirt with French cuffs and a spread collar, and his suit was navy with a barely perceptible scarlet stripe. "As your lawyer," he said, "I must raise some unpleasant points."

"Go right ahead."

"You have a mistress, a young woman who is expecting your child. You and your wife were not getting along. Your wife refused to give you a divorce. Your business, while extremely profitable, has been experiencing recent cash-flow problems. Your wife's life was insured in the amount of five hundred thousand dollars with yourself as

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beneficiary. In addition, you are her sole heir, and her estate after taxes will still be considerable. Is all of that correct?"

"It is," Bridgewater admitted. "The police found it significant."

"I'm not surprised."

Bridgewater leaned forward suddenly, placing his large and sinewy hands upon Ehrengraf's desk. He looked capable of yanking the top off it and dashing it against the wall. "Mr. Ehrengraf," he said, his voice barely above a whisper, "do you think I should plead guilty?"

"Of course not."

"I could plead to a reduced charge."

"But you're innocent," Ehrengraf said. "My clients are always innocent, Mr. Bridgewater. My fees are high, sir. One might even pronounce them towering. But I collect them only if I win an acquittal or if the charges against my client are peremptorily dismissed. I intend to demonstrate your innocence, Mr. Bridgewater, and my fee system provides me with the keenest incentive toward that end."

"I see."

"Now," said Ehrengraf, coming out from behind his desk and rubbing his small hands briskly together, "let us look at the possibilities. Your wife ate the same meal you did, is that correct?"

"It is."

"And drank the same wine?"

"Yes. The residue in the bottle was unpoisoned. But I could have put Cydonex directly into her glass."

"But you didn't, Mr. Bridgewater, so let us not weigh ourselves down with what you could have done. She became ill after the meal, I believe you said."

"Yes. She was headachey and nauseous."

"Headachey and nauseated, Mr. Bridgewater. That she was nauseous in the bargain would be a subjective conclusion of your own. She lay down for a nap?"

"Yes."

"But first she took something."

"Yes that's right."

"Aspirin, something of that sort?"

"I suppose it's most aspirin," Bridgewater said. "It's a patent medicine called Darnitol. Alyssa took it for everything from cramps to athlete's foot."

"Darnitol," Ehrengraf said. "An analgesic?"

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"An analgesic, an anodyne, an antispasmodic, a panacea, a catholicon, a cure-all, a nostrum. Alyssa believed in it, Mr. Ehrengraf, and my guess would be that her belief was responsible for much of the preparation's efficacy. I don't take pills, never have, and my headaches seemed to pass as quickly as hers." He laughed shortly. "In any event, Darnitol proved an inadequate antidote for Cydonex."

"Hmm," said Ehrengraf.

"To think it was the Darnitol that killed her."

Five weeks had passed since their initial meeting, and events in the interim had done a great deal to improve both the circumstances and the spirit of Ehrengraf's client. Gardner Bridgewater was no longer charged with his wife's murder.

"It was one of the first things I thought of," Ehrengraf said. "The police had their vision clouded by the extraordinary coincidence of your purchase and use of Cydonex as a vehicle for the extermination of squirrels. But my view was based on the presumption of your innocence, and I was able to discard this coincidence as irrelevant. It wasn't until other innocent men and women began to die of Cydonex poisoning that a pattern began to emerge. A schoolteacher in Kenmore. A retired steelworker in Lackawanna. A young mother in Orchard Park."

"And more," Bridgewater said. "Eleven in all, weren't there?"

"Twelve," Ehrengraf said. "But for diabolical cleverness on the part of the poisoner, he could never have gotten away with it for so long."

"I don't understand how he managed it."

"By leaving no incriminating residue," Ehrengraf explained. "We've had poisoners of this sort before, tainting tablets of some nostrum or other. And there was a man in Boston, I believe it was, who stirred arsenic into the sugar in coffee-shop dispensers. With any random mass-murder of that sort, sooner or later a pattern emerges. But this killer only tampered with a single capsule in each bottle of Darnitol. The victim might consume capsules with impunity until the one fatal pill was swallowed, whereupon there would be no evidence remaining in the bottle, no telltale leftover capsule to give the police a clue."

"Good heavens."

"Indeed. The police did in fact test as a matter of course the bottles of Darnitol which were invariably found among the victims' effects. But the pills invariably proved innocent. Finally, when the death

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toll mounted high enough, the fact that Darnitol was associated with every single death proved indismissable. The police seized drugstore stocks of the painkiller, and again and again bottles turned out to have a single tainted capsule in with the legitimate pills."

"And the actual killer—"

"Will be found, I shouldn't doubt, in the course of time." Ehrengraf straightened his tie, a stylish specimen showing a half inch stripe of royal-blue flanked by two narrower stripes, one of gold and the other of a vivid green, all displayed on a field of navy. The tie was that of the Caedmon Society, and it brought back memories. "Some disgruntled employee of the Darnitol manufacturer, I shouldn't wonder," said Ehrengraf carelessly. "That's usually the case in this sort of affair. Or some unbalanced chap who took the pill himself and was unhappy with the results. Twelve dead, plus your wife of course, and a company on the verge of ruin, because I shouldn't think too many people are rushing down to their local pharmacy and purchasing Extra-Strength Darnitol."

"There's a joke going round," Bridgewater said, flexing his large and sinewy hands. "Patient calls his doctor, says he's got a headache, an upset stomach, whatever. Doctor says, 'Take two Darnitol and call me in the Hereafter.' "

"Indeed."

Bridgewater sighed. "I suppose," he said, "the real killer may never be found."

"Oh, I suspect he will," Ehrengraf said. "In the interests of rounding things out, you know. And, speaking of rounding things out, sir, if you've your checkbook with you—"

"Ah, yes," said Bridgewater. He made his check payable to Martin H. Ehrengraf and filled in the sum, which was a large one. He paused then, his pen hovering over the space for his signature. Perhaps he reflected for a moment on the curious business of paying so great an amount to a person who, on the face of it, had taken no concrete action on his behalf.

But who is to say what thoughts go through a man's mind? Bridgewater signed the check, tore it from the checkbook, and presented it with a flourish.

"What would you drink with veal?" he demanded.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You said the Nuit St. Georges would be overpowering with veal. What would you choose?"

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"I shouldn't choose veal in the first place. I don't eat meat."

"Don't eat meat?" Bridgewater, who looked as though he might cheerfully consume a whole lamb at a sitting, was incredulous. "What *do* you eat?"

"Tonight I'm having a nut-and-soybean casserole," the little lawyer said. He blew on the check to dry the ink, folded it, and put it away. "Nuit St. Georges should do nicely with it," he said. "Or perhaps a good bottle of Chambertin."

The Chambertin and the nut-and-soybean casserole which it had so superbly complemented were but a memory four days later when a uniformed guard ushered the little lawyer into the cell where Evans Wheeler awaited him. The lawyer, neatly turned out in a charcoal-grey-flannel suit with a nipped-in waist, a Wedgwood-blue shirt, and a navy tie with a below-the-knot design, contrasted sharply in appearance with his prospective client. Wheeler, as awkwardly tall and thin as a young Lincoln, wore striped overalls and a denim shirt. His footwear consisted of a pair of chain-store running shoes. The lawyer wore highly polished cordovan loafers.

And yet, Ehrengraf noted, the young man was poised enough in his casual costume. It suited him, even to the stains and chemical burns on the overalls and the ragged patch on one elbow of the workshirt.

"Mr. Ehrengraf," said Wheeler, extending a bony hand. "Pardon the uncomfortable surroundings. They don't go out of their way to make suspected mass-murderers comfortable." He smiled ruefully. "The newspapers are calling it the crime of the century."

"That's nonsense," said Ehrengraf. "The century's not over yet. But the crime's unarguably a monumental one, sir, and the evidence against you would seem to be particularly damning."

"That's why I want you on my side, Mr. Ehrengraf."

"Well," said Ehrengraf.

"I know your reputation, sir. You're a miracle worker, and it looks as though that's what I need."

"What you very likely need," Ehrengraf said, "is a master of delaying tactics. Someone who can stall your case for as long as possible to let some of the heat of the moment be discharged. Then, when public opinion has lost some of its fury, he can arrange for you to plead guilty to homicide while of unsound mind. Some sort of insanity defense might work, or might at least reduce the severity of your sentence."

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"But I'm innocent, Mr. Ehrengraf."

"I wouldn't presume to say otherwise, Mr. Wheeler, but I don't know that I'd be the right person to undertake your defense. I charge high fees, you see, which I collect only in the event that my clients are entirely exonerated. This tends to limit the nature of my clients."

"To those who can afford you."

"I've defended paupers. I've defended the poor as a court-appointed attorney and I volunteered my services on behalf of a penniless poet. But in the ordinary course of things, my clients seem to have two things in common. They can afford my high fees. And, of course, they're innocent."

"I'm innocent."

"Indeed."

"And I'm a long way from being a pauper, Mr. Ehrengraf. You know that I used to work for Triage Corporation, the manufacturer of Darnitol."

"So I understand."

"You know that I resigned six months ago."

"After a dispute with your employer."

"Not a dispute," Wheeler said. "I told him where he could resituate a couple of test tubes. You see, I was in a position to make the suggestion, although I don't know that he was in a position to follow it. On my own time I'd developed a process for extenuating lapiform polymers so as to produce a variable-stress oxypolymer capable of withstanding—"

Wheeler went on to explain just what the oxypolymer was capable of withstanding, and Ehrengraf wondered what the young man was talking about. He tuned in again to hear him say, "And so my royalty on the process in the first year will be in excess of six hundred fifty thousand dollars, and I'm told that's only the beginning."

"Only the beginning," said Ehrengraf.

"I haven't sought other employment because there doesn't seem to be much point in it, and I haven't changed my life style because I'm happy as I am. But I don't want to spend the rest of my life in prison, Mr. Ehrengraf, nor do I want to escape on some technicality and be loathed by my neighbors for the remainder of my days. I want to be exonerated and I don't care what it costs me."

"Of course you do," said Ehrengraf, drawing himself stiffly erect. "Of course you do. After all, son, you're innocent."

"Exactly."

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"Although," Ehrengraf said with a sigh, "your innocence may be rather tricky to prove. The evidence—"

"Is overpowering."

"Like Nuit St. Georges with veal. A search of your workroom revealed a half full container of Cydonex. You denied ever having seen it before."

"Absolutely."

Ehrengraf frowned. "I wonder if you mightn't have purchased it as an aid to pest control. Rats are troublesome. One is always being plagued by rats in one's cellar, mice in one's pantry, squirrels in one's attic—"

"And bats in one's belfry, I suppose, but my house has always been comfortingly free of vermin. I keep a cat. I suppose that helps."

"I'm sure it must, but I don't know that it helps your case. You seem to have purchased Cydonex from a chemical-supply house on North Division Street, where your signature appears in the Poison Control ledger."

"A forgery."

"No doubt, but a convincing one. Bottles of Darnitol, some unopened, others with a single Cydonex-filled capsule added, were found on a closet shelf in your home. They seem to be from the same lot as those used to murder thirteen people."

"I was framed, Mr. Ehrengraf."

"And cleverly so, it would seem."

"I never bought Cydonex. I never heard of Cydonex—not until people started dying of it."

"Oh? You worked for the plastics company that discovered the substance. That was before you took employment with the Darnitol people."

"It was also before Cydonex was invented. You know those dogs people mount on their dashboards and the head bobs up and down when you drive?"

"Not when I drive," Ehrengraf said.

"Nor I either, but you know what I mean. My job was finding a way to make the dogs' eyes more realistic. If you had a dog bobbing on your dashboard, would you even *want* the eyes to be more realistic?"

"Well," said Ehrengraf.

"Exactly. I quit that job and went to work for the Darnitol folks, and then my previous employer found a better way to kill rats, and so it looks as though I'm tied into the murders in two different ways.

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But actually I've never had anything to do with Cydonex and I've never so much as swallowed a Darnitol, let alone paid good money for that worthless snake oil."

"*Someone* bought those pills."

"Yes, but it wasn't—"

"And someone purchased that Cydonex. And forged your name to the ledger."

"Yes."

"And planted the bottles of Darnitol on drugstore and supermarket shelves after fatally tampering with their contents."

"Yes."

"And waited for the random victims to buy the pills, to work their way through the bottle until they ingested the deadly capsule, and to die in agony. And planted evidence to incriminate you."

"Yes."

"And made an anonymous call to the police to put them on your trail." Ehrengraf permitted himself a slight smile, one that did not quite reach his eyes. "And there he made his mistake," he said. "He could have waited for nature to take its course, just as he had already waited for the Darnitol to do its deadly work. The police were checking on ex-employees of Triage Corp. They'd have gotten to you sooner or later. But he wanted to hurry matters along, and that proves you were framed, sir, because who but the man who framed you would ever think to have called the police?"

"So the very phone call that got me on the hook serves to get me off the hook?"

"Ah," said Ehrengraf, "would that it were that easy."

Unlike Gardner Bridgewater, young Evans Wheeler proved a model of repose. Instead of pacing back and forth across Ehrengraf's carpet, the chemist sat in Ehrengraf's overstuffed leather chair, one long leg crossed over the other. His costume was virtually identical to the garb he had worn in prison, although an eye as sharp as Ehrengraf's could detect a different pattern to the stains and acid burns that gave character to the striped overalls. And this denim shirt, Ehrengraf noted, had no patch upon its elbow. Yet.

Ehrengraf, seated at his desk, wore a Dartmouth-green blazer over tan flannel slacks. As was his custom on such occasions, his tie was once again the distinctive Caedmon Society cravat.

"Ms. Joanna Pellatrice," Ehrengraf said. "A teacher of seventh- and eighth-grade social studies at Kenmore Junior High School.

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Unmarried, twenty-eight years of age, and living alone in three rooms on Deerhurst Avenue."

"One of the killer's first victims."

"That she was. The very first victim, in point of fact, although Ms. Pellatrice was not the first to die. Her murderer took one of the capsules from her bottle of Darnitol, pried it open, disposed of the innocent if ineffectual powder within, and replaced it with the lethal Cydonex. Then he put it back in her bottle, returned the bottle to her medicine cabinet or purse, and waited for the unfortunate woman to get a headache or cramps or whatever impelled her to swallow the capsules."

"Whatever it was," Wheeler said, "they wouldn't work."

"This one did, when she finally got to it. In the meantime, her intended murderer had already commenced spreading little bottles of joy all over the metropolitan area, one capsule to each bottle. There was danger in doing so, in that the toxic nature of Darnitol might come to light before Ms. Pellatrice took her pill and went to that big classroom in the sky. But he reasoned, correctly it would seem, that a great many persons would die before Darnitol was seen to be the cause of death. And indeed this proved to be the case. Ms. Pellatrice was the fourth victim, and there were to be many more."

"And the killer—"

"Refused to leave well enough alone. His name is George Grodek, and he'd had an affair with Ms. Pellatrice, although married to another teacher all the while. The affair evidently meant rather more to Mr. Grodek than it did to Ms. Pellatrice. He had made scenes, once at her apartment, once at her school during a midterm examination. The newspapers describe him as a disappointed suitor, and I suppose the term's as apt as any."

"You say he refused to leave well enough alone."

"Indeed," said Ehrengraf. "If he'd been content with depopulating the area and sinking Triage Corporation, I'm sure he'd have gotten away with it. The police would have had their hands full checking people with a grudge against Triage, known malcontents and mental cases, and the sort of chaps who get themselves into messes of that variety. But he has a neat sort of mind, has Mr. Grodek, and so he managed to learn of your existence and decided to frame you for the chain of murders."

Ehrengraf brushed a piece of lint from his lapel. "He did a workmanlike job," he said, "but it broke down on close examination. That signature in the Poison Control book did turn out to be a forgery,

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and matching forgeries of your name—trials if you will—turned up in a notebook hidden away in a dresser drawer in his house."

"That must have been hard for him to explain."

"So were the bottles of Darnitol in another drawer of the dresser. So was the Cydonex, and so was the little machine for filling and closing the capsules, and a whole batch of broken capsules which evidently represented unsuccessful attempts at pill-making."

"Funny he didn't flush it all down the toilet."

"Successful criminals become arrogant," Ehrengraf explained. "They believe themselves to be untouchable. Grodek's arrogance did him in. It led him to frame you, and to tip the police to you."

"And your investigation did what no police investigation could do."

"It did," said Ehrengraf, "because mine started from the premise of your innocence. If you were innocent, someone else was guilty. If someone else was guilty and had framed you, that someone must have had a motive for the crime. If the crime had a motive, the murderer must have had a reason to kill one of the specific victims. And if that was the case, one had only to look to the victims to find the killer."

"You make it sound so simple," said Wheeler. "And yet if I hadn't had the good fortune to engage your services, I'd be spending the rest of my life in prison."

"I'm glad you see it that way," Ehrengraf said, "because the size of my fee might otherwise seem excessive." He named a figure, whereupon the chemist promptly uncapped a pen and wrote out a check.

"I've never written a check for so large a sum," he said reflectively.

"Few people have."

"Nor have I ever gotten greater value for my money. How fortunate I am that you believed in me, in my innocence."

"I never doubted it for a moment."

"You know who else claims to be innocent? Poor Grodek. I understand the madman's screaming in his cell, shouting to the world that he never killed anyone." Wheeler flashed a mischievous smile. "Perhaps he should hire you, Mr. Ehrengraf."

"Oh, dear," said Ehrengraf. "No, I think not. I can sometimes work miracles, Mr. Wheeler, or what have the appearance of miracles, but I can work them only on behalf of the innocent. And I don't think the power exists to persuade me of poor Mr. Grodek's innocence. No, I fear the man is guilty, and I'm afraid he'll be forced to

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pay for what he's done." The little lawyer shook his head. "Do you know Longfellow, Mr. Wheeler?"

"Old Henry Wadsworth, you mean? 'By the shores of Gitche Gumee, by the something Big-Sea-Water?' That Longfellow?"

"The shining Big-Sea-Water," said Ehrengraf. "Another client reminded me of *The Village Blacksmith*, and I've been looking into Longfellow lately. Do you care for poetry, Mr. Wheeler?"

"Not too much."

" 'In the world's broad field of battle,' " Ehrengraf said,

" 'In the bivouac of Life,

" 'Be not like dumb, driven cattle!

" 'Be a hero in the strife!' "

"Well," said Evans Wheeler, "I suppose that's good advice, isn't it?"

"None better, sir. 'Let us then be up and doing, with a heart for any fate; still achieving, still pursuing, learn to labor and to wait.' "

"Ah, yes," said Wheeler.

" 'Learn to labor and to wait,' " said Ehrengraf. "That's the ticket, eh? 'To labor and to wait.' Longfellow, Mr. Wheeler. Listen to the poets, Mr. Wheeler. The poets have the answers, haven't they?" And Ehrengraf smiled, with his lips and with his eyes.

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

LAST GASP

by RICHARD MAPLES

An angry young lady named Jill
Killed her husband with gas from the grill.
She wasn't contrite,
But fainted outright
When she got the gas-company bill!

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DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

Don Gilbert's first story, "Time and Place," in the March 1983 issue, was a moving study of a widower getting on in years. And while this new story is also about a widower getting on in years and has the same haunting evocation of the distant past, it is a singular and soul-stirring story, positive proof that Mr. Gilbert, who is himself approaching his 80th year, has more than one string to his bow . . .

A SECRET PLACE

by DON GILBERT

When Dell Hickman awakened, the sun was well up and a white-coated young man was standing at the foot of his bed. After a moment he remembered where he was—the Gabriel Nursing Home.

Gabriel come blow your horn, Dell thought.

"Good morning, Gramp," the white-coated man said, "how come you're not up yet? You're usually the first one dressed around here. And today is your birthday."

"I had dreams, Harry. I don't remember what they were but they made me wakeful."

That was not exactly truthful—Dell remembered hazily what those dreams had been. They came often of late, very private dreams that he saw no reason to tell even his son, Aron, let alone Harry. They had to do with a trip he'd taken to New Hampshire when he was around thirty. What had started out as a proxy visit for his ailing father—a settlement of some family property—had ended up as the most important event in his life. He had met his sweet Fran and married her after a whirlwind week. What a time of revelation that had been for both of them!

He slid his pajamaed legs out of bed, thinking what a cheerful

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cuss Harry was, so gentle with old people, even if he was getting paid for it. "I've laid out fresh clothes for you," Harry said. "Your son is coming for you at eleven. How old did you say you'd be today?"

"Ninety since five o'clock this morning," Dell said, hoping he was right but not too sure. Yesterday, today, tomorrow were becoming increasingly jumbled in his mind. But he had found that a bold front usually carried the day. And what lay far back in the mystery of his mind was no one else's affair.

"I hope I'm as sound as you when I reach your age."

People were always saying things like that, but Dell chose to believe Harry meant it. In his prime Dell had been five foot eight, a muscular hundred and sixty-five pounds. He'd never wanted to be a big man, just big enough to face the world and protect the ones he loved. Big men sort of collapsed as time went by. Dell was still erect. He wore glasses and had store teeth, but his shock of white hair was vigorous. The doctor said his heart murmur was nature's way of telling him to be careful—very careful. No sudden or unusual physical exertion. No undue mental excitement.

Just the same, his mind was no longer what it had been. Dell figured it was something like a hibernating animal who slumbers, comes awake, shifts about, then sleeps again. He was careful not to say things that might lead to questions: old secrets must be kept forever buried. Fran was dead for fifteen years now. She had never kept a secret from him, but he had from her. She had never once doubted his integrity, but he had only deceived to shield her.

After Fran died, he sold the two farms—his folks' homestead and the new farm across the creek Fran and he had purchased. Aron, now past fifty and a successful lawyer at the county seat, had had no desire to become a farmer. Nor had he desired to complicate his life by becoming a landlord. So Dell had sold the farms, keeping only the homestead cabin and the white pines along the creek. He gave the new owners an option on that property, too, if Aron decided to sell it later on.

Aron and his wife Sue had wanted him to come and live with them. They had a ranch-type house just outside of town with plenty of room, and his grandchildren loved him, but Dell could not agree to such an arrangement. He cared for his family with an encompassing devotion, but he was afraid of what might happen if he became too close an accessory to their lives. It was lonely at the cabin without Fran, but it would be lonely anywhere without her.

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And he had found a surprising peace there, a privacy that barricaded his secret self.

It wasn't until he was eighty-eight that he decided to move into the Gabriel Nursing Home.

Harry said, "I'll bring your breakfast tray in here, Gramp. An egg, fruit, toast, and coffee. Enough to keep you going 'til your birthday feast. O.K.?"

"O.K.," Dell said, the past receding into a mist.

It was a beautiful summer day as Aron tooled his sportscar off the freeway onto country macadam. Dell felt a possessive fulfillment sitting beside his son.

"Well, Dad," Aron asked, "what would you like to do? Your favorite daughter-in-law packed us a snack for noon: sandwiches, fruit, and coffee—not enough to spoil your birthday dinner. I think the kids have something special planned, by the way. There's been a lot of whispering going on the last few days."

Dell relaxed. "You know what I'd like to do today, son? Just see the farms. See how the crops are coming along. Maybe stop at our old place if the Petersons are home. Go down to the cabin—" He stopped, then added hesitantly, "I hope you and Sue and the kids will keep the cabin after I'm gone."

He glanced obliquely at his son—a handsome man with clear hazel eyes, a frosting of grey in his curly auburn hair, a cameo profile like his mother's. A strong man, a thoughtful son, and a good father.

"Don't worry, Dad. The way things are going, no-trespass signs on all the farms, a man will have to have a place of his own if he hunts."

"I'm not trying to back you into a corner, Aron. Whatever you decide about the cabin and the old pines will be O.K. with me."

"The kids would raise the roof if anyone mentioned selling the cabin."

They had gone over this a dozen times before but now Dell settled back with a sense of relief. They passed a horse and carriage neatly clipping along. It was odd to see such an anachronism, although it was becoming a more common sight in the district. Amish people were buying many of the old farms and their religion forbad modern conveniences such as cars. Dell had owned one of the first cars in the neighborhood but he still liked the sight of a horse and buggy.

Fran and he had once had a neat little outfit—a single buggy with a sorrel driving mare. Annie was her name. Smarter than many a

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human. Everyone had horse rigs in those days. A man got to know every outfit in the district. Dell could still remember many of them and the names of their owners. Or could he? Certainly some of the past seemed sharper than the present, yet he knew the accuracy of his memory could not be trusted.

Now, just for the fun of it, he tried to recall some of the rigs that had traveled this road when it was still plain dirt. Ah, there was one, all alone, as if the others shunned it. A shiny black carriage with red wheel-spokes, its buttoned side-curtains seldom pulled back.

Whose? What did it really matter? But it did. In memory he could see the outfit boldly silhouetted against the sky. People said, and Dell believed it to be true, you could take that rig anywhere in the neighborhood, turn it around, set the grey gelding that pulled it on the right road to home, and he would arrive safe at his barn with never a twitch of the guiding reins.

But *whose rig?* Irritated, Dell could not remember. Yet there was something about the driver—he had vanished, completely, mysteriously. A mystery that had never been solved. Dell turned toward his son with a question on his lips even as a warning sounded far back in his brain. Careful. Never talk about that rig. Why? Someday he might remember.

"We're getting on home ground," Aron said. "Want to stop and say hello to the Petersons?"

"How about when we come back? It's most noon now, and they'd want us to eat with them. I'm anxious to get to the cabin."

And it was so. Excitement tingled through him like a magnetic force.

Around a concealing band of trees, past the Petersons, Aron left the macadam for a narrow dirt road. Waist-high cornfields lay beyond hedges of hazel brush and, over a knoll, Dell could see the stand of white pine and tamarack on the land he still owned along the creek.

Suddenly Dell thought: I never really owned that land or those trees. I was only their caretaker. You can never really own the Lord's land, but if you care for it it will care for you and guard your secrets.

The car rumbled over a plank bridge, below which peat-brown water flowed silently over pale sand. The road ran straight between poplar and birch, ending on umber needles before the cabin door.

"How about a cup of coffee now?" Aron asked.

"Later," Dell said. "First I want to take a walk to the creek. Just

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me if you don't mind, son. There's something I want to remember down there, something important I can't put my finger on."

Aron hesitated. "O.K., Dad, but don't hurry. And don't stay long. I'll take a look around to see that everything's shipshape, then I'll come down the trail to meet you."

"When we get back it will be time for my medication," Dell said, wanting Aron to know he remembered about things.

He got out of the car and stood leaning against it for a moment, his feet testing familiar turf. Then he moved slowly down the sandy trail and into the pine shadows. The strange urgency that had nagged him ever since they had passed the Amish buggy possessed him wholly now, quickening his steps until he had to command himself to be more controlled, to remember the doctor's orders. Aron could no longer see him, but still he felt the need to dissemble. That was hard to do because a breeze in the pines was a hurrying sound. And suddenly he felt young, strong, the man he had been fifty years before.

From behind him he heard the scurry of ghostly buggy wheels in a patch of sand. A voice from the dead past shouted: Dell Hickman, stop where you are!

In an illusion of reality Dell swung about. What do you want with me, Amos Devlin? It was the carriage of his memory pulled by the grey gelding. He knew the man and the outfit now.

You know what I want well enough. I stopped at your cabin but there was no one home.

My wife and son are away for a few days. She's caring for a sick friend in town.

Good. I want to talk to you alone. I hope you've seen the light by now.

My wife being away makes no difference. She agrees with me. The answer to your proposition is still no.

I want that creek timber, Dell, and I'll have it! Why else would I take a mortgage on this sandpatch so you could buy a decent farm? Even a fool should have surmised that, and you're no fool. You've got nothing to lose and much to gain. I'm offering you easy payments on your mortgage and you can have the creek land back when I'm through logging it. All your neighbors with stands of pine have sold to me!

The others didn't sell willingly, you forced them to. There's hardly a man in the district who isn't in debt to you. I'm one man you can't

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bully, Amos Devlin. I'll lose my farm before I sell those trees! And my wife goes along with me—we think as one!

I wonder about that, but we shall see. You know me well enough to realize that when I want something I always have two strings to my bow.

I know there's little you'd hesitate at.

Amos Devlin leaned past the carriage curtains, the seams of his guant face hard as flint. Now there is something you don't know that I do. I'm no angel, but I don't intend to use this knowledge if you're reasonable. I made a trip to the New Hampshire town your wife came from. It was just a shot in the dark, a spooky sort of feeling I had about her. Shall I go on?

Dell stood quiet, completely stunned. He had never believed anything like this could happen in a million years. His own beloved Fran. And he had promised to honor and protect her! To guard her secret!

I see by your face you know what I'm talking about, that your wife has told you. But to make sure you understand I'll go on.

NO!

Perhaps we should talk this over with your wife.

NO!

Don't be a damned fool. I know what I'm talking about. Your wife was never married before she met you, but I happened in the country cemetery where her stillborn daughter is buried.

A red mist swirled before Dell's eyes. It seemed his head, his heart, his whole body was bursting with blood. There was no fear in Devlin's face. He reached out and lifted the buggywhip from its socket.

We could talk this over with your wife but look at things my way and the affair can be settled right now. See things my way and your wife need never know of my visit.

Rage possessed Dell. Fran had told him everything before they were married and he believed her implicitly. It was the old talk of young love, false promises, and ultimate betrayal. Dell had offered her a new life, protection, and deliverance. And she had given him much more in return. Now what they had constructed so secretly, day by day, was about to be demolished! His hand clamped on Devlin's bony wrist. He wrenched him from the carriage and sent him crashing into the sweet fern.

The grey gelding snorted but stood still. Abruptly, the insane rage that had possessed Dell burned away, replaced by chill reason. Devlin lay very still, face down on the ground. His heart beating wildly, Dell dropped to his knees and turned him face up. Blood was oozing and

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starting to clot around a hole in his temple where a jagged rock had penetrated the skull. Dell felt for a pulse. There was no heartbeat.

Without reasoning he decided what he must do. He must dispose of the body and destroy all signs of Devlin's visit. He felt he dared not face the law with a true account of what had happened. Even if his story was believed—and few who knew him would doubt it—he had killed a man. And he couldn't tell what had happened without revealing Fran's secret. He would land in prison, and what would become of his wife and son then? There was only one course for him to follow as he saw it.

Dell knew that Devlin's horse would not move until commanded, so he was taken care of for the moment. With the strength of desperation, he heaved Devlin over his shoulder and moved down the woodsy trail. The place he sought was deep in the pines and tamaracks, close to the creek. There was an opening some twenty foot across, a green-scummed morass with gaseous bubbles popping on its surface. Noisome in late summer and shunned except for snakes and frogs. There was no breeze and in the sticky stillness Dell could hear the far muttering of thunder. Sweat coursed down his ribs as he staggered down the trail with his burden. Reinforcing the quaking bog with a short log to stand on, he inserted the corpse feet first into the mire, working it gradually downward. This required patience and by the time the deed was accomplished, Dell was half mad and it was full dusk.

Thunder from scattered storms was a constant rumbling by the time Dell got Devlin's rig back to the main road. Buttoning down the loose side-curtains, he started the willing horse toward town and slipped into the woods for home. When he drove into town for Fran and Aron two days later, the place was buzzing with Amos Devlin's disappearance. The grey gelding had brought the carriage safe home and was found the next morning still patiently waiting outside his barn. But Devlin had disappeared. The sheriff and his deputies searched, questioned, called in law officers far from the state capital—all to no avail. Stories circulated but each one petered out. The series of thunderstorms that had passed through the area the afternoon and night of the disappearance seemed to have obliterated any clues that might have existed.

Truth to tell, no one really mourned the man who, people whispered, had made a fortune from others' misfortunes.

Sweat-drenched and dizzy from the noon heat, the laboring of his

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old heart, and the physical exertion he had momentarily recalled, Dell still followed down the woodsy trail. He was now more confused that ever, and the momentary total recall of long-past events was entirely gone. When he came to the secret place where some forty years ago he had forced Amos Devlin's stiffening corpse beneath the surface of the quagmire, he had no idea why he had come there. The springs, far beneath the surface, had long since dried up or found other outlets, leaving behind only a swampy opening bordered by cattails and haunted by dragonflies.

Dell moved slowly back up the trail, not knowing why but only that he must. He was very dizzy now and the pain in his chest was like a knife thrust. He stumbled, righted himself, and went staggering on.

"Dad—" A voice was calling from long ago and far away. "Yes? Yes—" he quavered and tears stung his eyes.

His feet caught in a trailing bramble vine, his heart seemed to explode in his chest, and the world before him swirled into blackness.

He pitched forward on the trail. He no longer heard the calling voice, or the pad of running feet, or the knowing whisper of the pines.

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a *NEW* Ben Snow story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

It was a stern-wheeler, able to push its bow into shallow river shores and dock almost anywhere. Some 180 feet in length, with tall twin stacks belching black smoke, the River Ridge *was a majestic sight as Ben watched her pull out from shore and turn north on the river. She was carrying a cargo of molasses and cotton, with fifty-five passengers and crew. She rounded a bend of the Mississippi and passed out of sight.*

Edward D. Hoch's eighth story about Ben Snow, the first in EQMM . . .

THE VANISHED STEAMBOAT

by EDWARD D. HOCH

The business that brought Ben Snow downriver to New Orleans during the early months of 1902 had been successfully concluded, but he found himself reluctant to return west. The weather was pleasant and he'd made some good friends, including a riverboat gambler named Eddie Abilene who had a way with a deck of cards and a good story. It was Eddie who coaxed him upriver to Vicksburg in the spring when the threat of the annual flooding had finally subsided.

"Tell me about yourself for a change, Ben," Eddie suggested one evening over drinks at a pleasant little café on the Vicksburg riverfront. "I'm always telling stories and all you do is sit there and listen."

Ben Snow merely smiled. "I've gotten through forty-two years without talking about myself, Eddie. No reason to change now."

But that wasn't good enough for Eddie Abilene. "Fellow told me

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yesterday you've got quite a reputation with a gun. I never even knew you to carry one."

"That's just talk. A story got started in my younger days that I was Billy the Kid. It's a tough reputation to live down—or live up to, for that matter."

Eddie's eyes narrowed. "Billy the Kid's been dead for twenty years."

"You know it and I know it, but there's a lot of folks who haven't gotten the word. And he'd be just about my age if he was still alive."

"But you are fast with a gun?"

"I used to be, when I carried one. But that was in Texas, and Mexico, and the Indian territories. I don't need one on the Mississippi."

Eddie Abilene let his blue-velvet coat fall open to reveal the little Derringer under his arm. "I'm never without one on the river. Sometimes the cards don't turn out right for some people and it makes them mad. You know the steamboat *River Ridge*? It's docked a few miles downriver right now."

"I've seen it."

"I was on her last year on the run up to St. Louis, having a friendly game of poker with three strangers. One of them was losing pretty heavy and when I beat out his full house with four jacks, he went for his gun. His name was Jericho Jones and he was fast. Put a bullet through my coat before I even had my gun out. Then I missed him on the first shot and hit a big mirror behind him. The glass broke and came down on top of him. If that hadn't put him out of action, I don't know what would have happened."

Ben tried to backtrack on the conversation to remember how the subject of riverboat gun battles had come up, but he finally decided Eddie was just talking. "When are you shipping out again?" he asked.

"I don't know. When I need money, I guess. Vicksburg's a good little town but there's not much happening here."

As if to prove him false, a fight erupted on the dock at that moment. Three or four men were involved, and Ben could hear shouts and see them moving in the darkness. There was a sudden cry for help from one man and a scream cut off in the middle. "Let's go see what the trouble is," Ben said.

Before they reached the dock, the figures separated and two men took off in opposite directions. One man remained sprawled at

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the edge of the dock. "He's been stabbed," Ben said. "Get some help, Eddie. I'll stay with him."

While Eddie ran off, Ben tried to stop the flow of blood from a wound in the man's side. "Can you hear me?" he asked him. "Who stabbed you?"

But the man was beyond answering. There was blood in his mouth and a moment later he died. When Eddie arrived with help, it was too late. A crowd had gathered by that time, drawn from the bars along the riverfront. "I know him," one man said. "It's Frank Beecher, a gambler—he traveled on the *River Ridge*."

"That's him, all right," Eddie confirmed. "I met him once or twice in New Orleans."

No one shed many tears over dead gamblers, and even Eddie didn't seem sorry to see him gone. "Aren't you ever afraid you might end up like that?" Ben asked him later.

"Ben, if one thing don't get you, something else will. But this just might be an opportunity for me. I might take the *River Ridge* up to St. Louis again and see if I can make a little money along the way."

"Why would you do that?"

"There's an opening for a gambling man and those are hard to come by these days. All them railroads going into St. Louis—I'm afraid steamboats are a dying breed. A lot of them have stopped running already. They say in June they'll start running a train called the *Twentieth Century Limited* from New York to Chicago. It'll make the run in twenty hours. And automobiles! Last month something called the American Automobile Association started up, to encourage people to drive themselves. Trains and automobiles—that's the future, Ben, not steamboats. But some like the *River Ridge* got a few good years left in them, and I might as well keep riding them. Come along with me?"

Ben shook his head. "I'm not ready to head north yet."

He did, however, accompany Eddie Abilene to the dock in the morning and watch him walk up one of the familiar twin gangplanks as the steamboat tooted its whistle and prepared to shove off. Like most such boats, it was a stern-wheeler, able to push its bow into shallow river shores and dock almost anywhere. Some 180 feet in length, with tall twin stacks belching black smoke, the *River Ridge* was a majestic sight as Ben watched her pull out from shore and turn north on the river. She was carrying a cargo of molasses and cotton, with fifty-five passengers and crew. She rounded a bend of the Mississippi and passed out of sight.

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Then all Ben could see was the wisp of smoke above the trees to mark her passage, and soon that, too, faded away in the morning sunshine.

Ben was seated at a table in front of the Vicksburg café, watching dockhands unload a southbound steamboat named the *Carrollton Belle* when a tall slim woman wearing boots and a fringed buckskin skirt approached him the following morning. "You're Ben Snow," she said.

"That's right. What can I do for you?"

She pulled out the other chair and sat down without invitation. "I'm Stella Daren. I want to hire you."

He'd heard the name before. "You own the *River Ridge.*"

"That's right, along with some smaller riverboats and barges, and a couple of New Orleans warehouses. They all belonged to my father until he died last year." He guessed her age at around thirty and suspected she'd be a lovely woman if she ever smiled. Right now she was looking grim. "I want to hire you to find the *River Ridge.*"

"That would be a simple task. She left here around eight yesterday morning. By now I'd estimate she's as far north as Helena, in Arkansas."

"You'd be wrong. The *River Ridge* never reached Greenville."

"What?"

"She disappeared on the river. Vanished. I want you to find her."

"A boat that big doesn't just vanish," Ben argued. "She must have hit something and sank."

"In broad daylight? With fifty-five people on board?" She shook her head, dismissing the notion. "I talked to the captain and pilot of the *Carrollton Belle.* They just came downriver from Memphis and they didn't see a trace of my steamboat."

Ben shrugged. "They probably passed in the night. It's a wide river."

"The *River Ridge* would have been past Greenville before dark. And the *Belle* was below Greenville before dark. Besides, there's no way they could have missed each other's lights. It was a clear night without any fog."

"What do they say in Greenville?"

"That the *River Ridge* never arrived there. They telegraphed me in New Orleans last night and I made the trip up here overnight. The captain of the *Belle* confirms it's not on the river."

"I've been up and down the Mississippi a few times," Ben told her.

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"North of here's mostly dense forest on either bank, with only an occasional farm. No place to hide a steamboat. If she's not there, she sank."

"I think she was stolen," Stella Daren said firmly, "by someone who's out to ruin me."

"Any ideas who?"

"A great many people were unhappy when I inherited my father's shipping business, including my half-brother. If anything's happened to the *River Ridge,* I think he'd be behind it. That's why I need a man who's fast with a gun."

He started to protest. "I'm not—"

"I'll pay you one thousand dollars in gold to locate the *River Ridge.*"

It was a great deal of money, and in Ben's precarious financial position it was an offer he could hardly refuse. For that much money he could even strap on the gun he kept in his suitcase. And if the *River Ridge* was indeed missing, then his friend Eddie Abilene was missing, too. He wanted to find Eddie.

"I'll look around, but I'm promising nothing. You need the police, not someone like me."

"The Vicksburg police aren't too interested, but the River Commission has crews out dragging for wreckage."

"I can't believe she could have sunk without survivors or witnesses," Ben said. "The river's been fairly calm these past few days."

"I can't believe it, either. That's why I think someone stole her. I've sent telegrams to all the ports up the river, asking for information. If I'm right about river pirates, there could be danger."

"I can take care of myself. Tell me about this half-brother of yours."

"Roddy—Roderick Daren. He was my father's son by a previous marriage, and he felt he should have inherited the steamboat and all the rest of it. He's five years older than me but he still looks and acts like a child. Father disowned him and left him nothing in the will. Roddy was very unhappy and made a few veiled threats to me. And there were accidents."

"Accidents?" Ben asked.

"Starting about a month ago, seven members of the *River Ridge* crew have been killed or injured. One apparently fell off the dock in New Orleans and drowned. Another was killed by a falling bale of cotton. One was badly injured by a runaway carriage. Two more were beaten in a barroom brawl."

"I get the picture," Ben said. "You may not know it, but two nights

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ago a gambler named Beecher was stabbed to death right down there on the dock."

"Another one? He worked the *River Ridge!*"

"That's what I heard. It seems as if someone has a grudge against the boat and everyone connected with it."

"I want to do some research of my own," she said, "with old river charts. Suppose you meet me at the office of the River Commission this afternoon at four."

"Good. That'll give me time to look around on my own."

She smiled for the first time as she left the table and Ben was right about what it would do for her face. He watched her walk across the plank flooring and up the narrow street that led into town. Then he decided he should speak with the skipper of the *Carrollton Belle,* but first he stopped by the room for his gun.

Docked in the shadow of the high railway bridge that spanned the river at this point, the *Belle* looked much like any other Mississippi steamboat except for twin red stripes that ran around its hull and superstructure. Ben went up one of the twin gangplanks and took the nearest stairs to the pilot house above. One or two crew members glanced up casually but no one questioned him.

The captain of the *Carrollton Belle* was a white-haired man with a Mark Twainlike mustache. His name was Thomas Botts and Ben found him hunched over his logbook.

"What can I do for you, sir?" he asked Ben, straightening up and closing the book. "If you're booking passage to New Orleans, you should see the—"

"It's not about passage. I'm looking into the disappearance of the *River Ridge.*"

"A boat can't just disappear on this river," Captain Botts said, and then immediately corrected himself. "Though one did, thirty years ago—the *Iron Mountain.* But that was before my time."

"Tell me about it."

"Are you from the River Commission?"

"I'm working for the owner, Stella Daren. My name's Ben Snow. Tell me about the *Iron Mountain.*"

"It started upriver out of this very port in June of '72, towing barges of cotton. Two hours later, another riverboat found the floating barges, but there was never a trace of the *Iron Mountain.* It looked as if the rope connecting the barges to the riverboat had been

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deliberately cut. Other boats searched the river, but there wasn't a trace of debris or survivors."

"A legend of the river," Ben said.

"No legend, mister. It really happened."

"How well do you know the *River Ridge?*"

Captain Botts held out his calloused hand. "Like the palm of my hand. She and the *Belle* were sister ships, both owned by a St. Louis company until they sold the *Ridge* to Daren and the *Belle* to my boss, a St. Louis businessman named Maxwell Greer."

"So the two were in competition."

"No, no—we mainly operate out of St. Louis and the *Ridge* is based in New Orleans. We pass on the river occasionally but that's about all."

Ben thought for a moment. "If I could rent a small boat for a few hours, would you go upriver with me while I look around?"

"The River Commission already has a search party out."

"I know, but I'd like to take a personal look and I need a guide. I'll pay you for your time."

Captain Botts studied Ben for a moment through half closed eyes. "I'll send my first mate. He knows the river as well as I do. You can wait outside for him."

"Thank you. I appreciate it."

Ben lounged against the pilot-house wall until he was joined by a burly man with a day's growth of beard. "I'm Roy Fox. Captain says you want a guide up the river."

"That's right. I'm looking for the *River Ridge*."

"Come along. I know a place where we can charter a launch to take us up to Milliken's Bend. That's about a two-hour trip each way."

Once he was out on the wide Mississippi, Ben wondered what it was he expected to find. Steamboats left no trails like horses in the sand, and the area of their search was only a small portion of the river below St. Louis. Still, he had to start somewhere. As the launch chugged past the wall of trees that lined the banks on either side, he listened to Roy Fox's stories of the river, riverboat pilots, and unscrupulous land speculators.

"I know a fellow owned a plantation back in the country, miles from the river. The land's so flat here that one night he cut a gutter across a narrow strip of river bank and changed the flow of the whole

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damn Mississippi! The river shifted a few miles to the west and came right up to his plantation, more than tripling its value."

"Is that possible?" Ben asked.

"Sure is. This river's constantly shifting its banks, especially in the southern portion below Cairo. Look at a map sometime and you'll see how it plays hob with state boundaries. When it shifts several miles to the east or west, seeking a lower route, it often forms deep horseshoe curves. Some of these horseshoes are later cut off when the river is shifted back and you get a whole series of crescent-shaped lakes. Some are even named Old River Lake."

"You know a lot about this area."

"I guess so. Been working it all my life."

Near Milliken's Bend, they came upon other search boats, some of which were dragging the river with long grappling hooks. Perhaps they hoped to snag one of the *River Ridge*'s twin smokestacks, but while Ben watched they came up with nothing more than the trunk of a dead tree.

"Sighted any debris?" Ben called out to men in the nearest boat.

"Not a trace," was the reply. "We don't think she went down around here."

"Then what happened to her?"

The man on the search boat shrugged. "Maybe she sailed south instead of north."

Ben and Roy Fox turned their own launch back soon afterward. The trip downstream was faster, and they were back at the Vicksburg dock by midafternoon. "Thanks for the tour," Ben told Fox, handing him a few dollars for his time. "Tell your Captain I appreciated it."

"It didn't seem to help in finding the *River Ridge*."

"I think it'll turn up," Ben said, though he didn't fully feel the confidence of his words.

He found Stella Daren at the River Commission office at four o'clock as arranged. She was studying a large wall chart of the lower Mississippi and talking to a well dressed man in a grey suit. "Oh, Ben—this is Ulysses Harris of the River Commission. We've been discussing the problem. Ben Snow, Mr. Harris."

Harris had a firm handshake and he came right to the point. "We have all our boats out searching, but there's no word yet. We have to accept the possibility that the *River Ridge* may never be found." He was a tall man and Ben guessed he'd been born during the Civil

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War and named after General Grant. That would make his age near forty.

"I have an idea," Stella Daren said, running her slender hand over the wall chart. "I read a great deal and I remember a story by that British writer, Conan Doyle. I think it appeared in the *Strand Magazine* a few years ago."

"What's that?" Ben asked.

"A British magazine. You must have heard of his Sherlock Holmes stories!"

"I don't get time for much reading. But tell me about it."

"This story, 'The Lost Special,' wasn't about Holmes, but it did involve a train that vanished between two stations. Just as the *River Ridge* vanished between two ports."

"What happened to the train in the story?" Harris asked.

"It was driven onto a siding and into a deep, disused mine."

Harris merely smiled. "There aren't any mines along the river."

"No, but there are sidings of a sort. Look at this map. See these arcs of water where the Mississippi used to flow?"

"A fellow was just telling me about those," Ben said. "He says they're now little lakes, without access to the river."

"It would be simple enough to cut a ditch and float the *River Ridge* into one of these lakes," Stella said, "then cover up the passage with tree limbs."

"That's a possibility," Ulysses Harris admitted. "I'll get some horsemen to search both banks."

"Do it now—today," Stella insisted. "I want the *River Ridge* back!"

Ben left the River Commission office with her and suggested they dine at one of the waterfront cafés. She was beginning to fascinate him in a way women rarely did and he found himself wanting to remain in her company as something other than a hired hand.

Over dinner he told her about his river cruise, but she wasn't impressed. "You spent the day at that and found nothing?"

"I wanted to get the feel of the river and check on the dragging operations."

"They won't find it. My enemies didn't sink the *River Ridge*."

"You still believe your half-brother is behind this?"

"No one else."

His attention was attracted to the bar, where a slender man in black seemed to be watching them. "Do you know him?" Ben asked her.

"I never saw him before."

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"Maybe he just likes to look at pretty women."

She chose to ignore his compliment and asked instead, "Did I show you the telegraph messages from the various points upriver?"

"No. I'd like to see them."

She passed the forms across the table and he read automatically: *No steamboats passed north or south in last 24 hours. No sign here of River Ridge.* It was signed *Jenkins, Greenville*, dated that morning.

"He's our freight agent there," Stella explained.

"Can you trust him?" Ben asked, his eyes straying to the bar once more. The slender man was still watching them.

"He could hardly lie about something like that. Fifty or a hundred people would have seen it pass, even at night."

"Excuse me a moment, will you?" Ben said. "I want to see what that man's up to."

He rose and strode quickly across the plank floor to the bar. The man in black tried to avert his gaze. "I don't want trouble, mister."

"Then what are you watching us for? Who are you?"

"Name's Jericho Jones."

"Jericho—You're the fellow took a shot at a friend of mine on the *River Ridge* last year."

He didn't deny it. "Eddie Abilene. I should have finished him that day, but I guess it don't matter now. He's feeding the fishes."

"You know that for a fact?"

"The boat's at the bottom, and Abilene along with it. Don't take her money for a job you can't do."

"You work for her half-brother, don't you?"

"What if I do?"

"Did he sink the *River Ridge?*"

"No, but none of us are sorry it's gone. And Abilene along with it."

Ben gave the man a shove and turned away. That was his mistake. "He's got a gun!" Stella shouted from across the room.

Ben whirled, his own weapon already in his hand, and fired at the flash of Jones's Derringer, throwing himself to one side as he did so. The slender man screamed in pain as Ben, off balance, hit the floor. He was starting to rise when the bartender said, "You're hit, mister. There's blood on your back."

Ben hesitated. He felt no pain, but gunshot wounds are like that at first. Stella Daren was bending over him now, and she said, "No, it's only paint. He's all right. The bullet missed him."

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"Glad to hear that," Ben commented, getting to his feet. The bartender joined the others in ministering to Jones's bleeding hand.

"How did you do that?" she asked, as Ben led her away. "I'd heard you were good with a gun, but you shot that Derringer right out of his hand without even aiming."

"It's not as hard as it looks," he explained. "When there's no time to aim properly, you fire at what your eyes are focused on. When I turned I was looking at his gun hand, and that's what I hit."

They were out on the street now. "Amazing. Why did he try to shoot you?"

"Because your half-brother Roddy wants me off the investigation—that's the most likely reason."

"Should we have stayed there until the police arrived? You did shoot the man, after all."

"I'm not used to your eastern customs," Ben admitted. "Out west, after you've shot a man you walk away fast. He might have friends who want to pursue the quarrel."

The sun had begun to sink beyond the row of trees in the western sky, and as they walked Ben felt the tension of the gun battle start to leave him. His months in New Orleans, away from the frontier life further west, had dulled his reaction time, tensed his muscles. Perhaps, past forty, he was only beginning to feel his age.

Suddenly, in the twilight, a tall figure stepped out from a little alleyway and loomed before them. His sudden appearance made Ben reach for his gun. Stella gasped in recognition.

"Roddy! What are you doing here?"

Seen all at once in the fading light, Roddy Daren was an angular man with a smooth face like a boy's, the picture of innocence. "I came to see you," he explained, "as soon as I heard the *River Ridge* had disappeared. I thought you might need help. I didn't expect one of my men to be shot up by your hired gun."

"This is Ben Snow," Stella said. "Ben is helping me find the *River Ridge,* he's not a hired gun!"

"Helping you find her? Here? Why isn't he out on the river?"

"I've been on the river, Mr. Daren, but I think the place to find the *River Ridge* may be right back here. When we know who's behind this plot, we'll know what happened to her."

"Why'd you shoot my man?"

"Jericho Jones? He drew on me. Men don't do that around here. He's lucky I hit his hand."

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They were interrupted by the sound of a steamboat whistle from the dock area. "It's the *River Ridge!*" Stella said.

Her half-brother shook his head. "Only the *Carrollton Belle,* getting ready to move south. They want to make New Orleans by tomorrow noon."

"That'll take some traveling," Ben said. "It was a twenty-four-hour trip upstream."

"The current will help."

Something was bothering Ben. "Would Ulysses Harris still be at the River Commission office?" he asked Stella.

"I don't know. It's getting late."

"I'll be back," he promised, and set off at a fast pace.

The River Commission office was locked, as he'd feared, and he hurried to the nearby telegraph office.

"What can I do for you?" the clerk asked.

"I want to send a telegram to St. Louis and wait for a reply."

"Sure thing. It'll take a while, though. Someday maybe we'll get one of them fancy long-distance telephone cables like they have back east. Then you can *talk* to St. Louis."

Ben quickly wrote his message. "Send this to the River Commission or the dockmaster or whoever's likely to be working at this time of night."

The man read Ben's brief written question. "*I* can answer this for you."

"Never mind—just send it."

"It's your money." The clerk shook his head and turned to the teletype.

Ben went outside just as the *Carrollton Belle* gave a final blast of her whistle and edged away from the dock.

He stood looking at his reflection in the glass window of the telegraph office.

South instead of north, the searcher had said. Maybe she sailed south instead of north.

South instead of north. Paint instead of blood.

He was running down toward the dock, toward the river launch they'd rented earlier in the day. Ulysses Harris was standing near the dock with a man wearing a sheriff's badge. "Come with me!" Ben shouted. "We have to overtake the *Carrollton Belle!*"

Harris frowned. "Are you saying you think the *Belle* sank the—"

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"No," Ben said, hurrying them toward the launch, "the *Belle* didn't sink the *River Ridge*—she *is* the *River Ridge!*"

When Roy Fox appeared at the *Belle*'s railing with a shotgun, Ben shot him once in the shoulder. That was the only shot fired as they climbed aboard and took command of the vessel. Captain Botts stood sadly in the pilot house, offering no resistance.

Ben found Eddie Abilene playing solitaire in the ship's lounge. Eddie smiled a greeting. "Hello, Ben," he said. "You've come to rescue me."

"What made you think you could get away with such a crazy scheme?" Ben said.

"It wasn't crazy at all. Even with the steamboat trade falling off, this boat is still worth a small fortune. If we'd gotten as far as New Orleans, we could have outfitted her so no one would recognize her. I've got papers to prove she's the stern-wheeler *Oklawawa,* out of Silver Springs, Florida. Easy profit, with a steamboat of my own and nobody hurt."

"Nobody hurt? What about the string of accidents to remove key crew members so you could substitute your own people? What about the killing of Frank Beecher so you could take his place on board at the last minute?"

Eddie Abilene shrugged. "He wasn't supposed to get killed, Ben. That was an accident. What more can I say?" He lifted his head and glanced out the windows. "We're changing direction."

"Going back to Vicksburg under the authority of the Mississippi River Commission. You'll all face charges there, and in New Orleans."

Eddie looked unhappy. "Too late for a deal, Ben?"

"Too late, Eddie."

"How'd you catch on? What did we do wrong?"

"The *River Ridge* might have sunk, or it might have lost its way up some hidden tributary, but there was no evidence of either. There was no evidence of *anything,* and that was your first mistake. The telegram from Greenville said no steamboats had passed there in twenty-four hours, north *or* southbound. But the *Carrollton Belle* supposedly was heading south from St. Louis. The mystery of why the *River Ridge* never passed Greenville from the south was compounded by the mystery of why the *Belle* never passed from the north. Was there an explanation? I knew there was when I remembered a few things.

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"The boats were sister ships, meaning they were about the same size and appearance. Stella Daren heard the *Belle*'s whistle and thought it was the *River Ridge*. And when I was in a fight earlier, someone thought there was blood on my back—but it was only paint. Later, I stared at my reflection in a window and tried to figure out how I could have gotten red paint on my back. Then I remembered the twin red stripes around the *Belle*'s hull and superstructure. I remembered leaning against the pilot-house wall. Those stripes were freshly painted, along with the name, to change the appearance of the *River Ridge*. You couldn't paint the whole hull while it was in the water, but you could manage it when it turned around upstream. You already had a different captain, mate, and other crewmen on board disguised as passengers, and they took over when the boat sailed back downstream as the *Carrollton Belle*. Tell me, what happened to the rest of the crew and passengers—the ones who weren't part of your gang?"

It took Eddie a long while to answer. Then he said, "They're locked up, tied and gagged, below. We figured they'd come around after a while. If they didn't—" he hesitated "—we planned to dump them in the swamp outside New Orleans."

"Dead or alive?"

He lifted his eyes to Ben. "Does it matter now?"

"I suppose not. You hid below deck all day yourself so you wouldn't be recognized. But I wonder why you stopped here at all—it was taking a chance."

"The boats always stop at Vicksburg. It would have been suspicious if we didn't. Fox was supposed to throw debris overboard upriver so it would look like we sank, but he forgot. He's a dreamer." He paused again and then asked, "Did you know I was involved, Ben?"

"I knew when I figured those accidents and beatings were caused to remove crew members and replace them with other men—when I remembered *you* were one of the replacements, for a gambler who rode the *River Ridge*."

"You should have come along, Ben. I'd have cut you in."

Moments later, as they neared the dock, Ben saw Stella Daren waiting. He was first down the gangplank and she greeted him with a yellow telegraph form. "What does this mean? It's for you and it says, *Carrollton Belle undergoing repairs at St. Louis dock*. Isn't this the—?"

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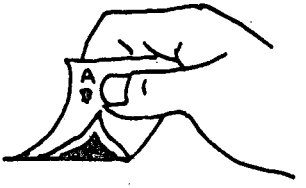
"This is your *River Ridge,* Stella—seized by a clever gang of pirates and given a fresh painting of red stripes so it could pass for the *Belle.* I wired St. Louis when I became suspicious, but I couldn't wait for the reply. They were going to overhaul it in New Orleans and sail it under another name."

"My captain—"

"He was held prisoner below decks, with a few dozen other passengers and crew. They've been freed, and the sheriff has the pirates under arrest."

"I owe you my thanks in addition to your fee, Ben. You found the *River Ridge* for me!"

And I lost a friend, Ben thought. He glanced up at the gangplank as Eddie Abilene and the others were being led down. He started to wave but changed his mind.



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by ANNA M. SANDA

A foolish young weakling named Tim
Took his wife for a midnight swim.
He held her head down
With intention to drown,
But *she* swam to shore, not him.

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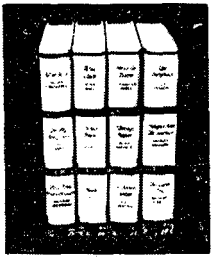

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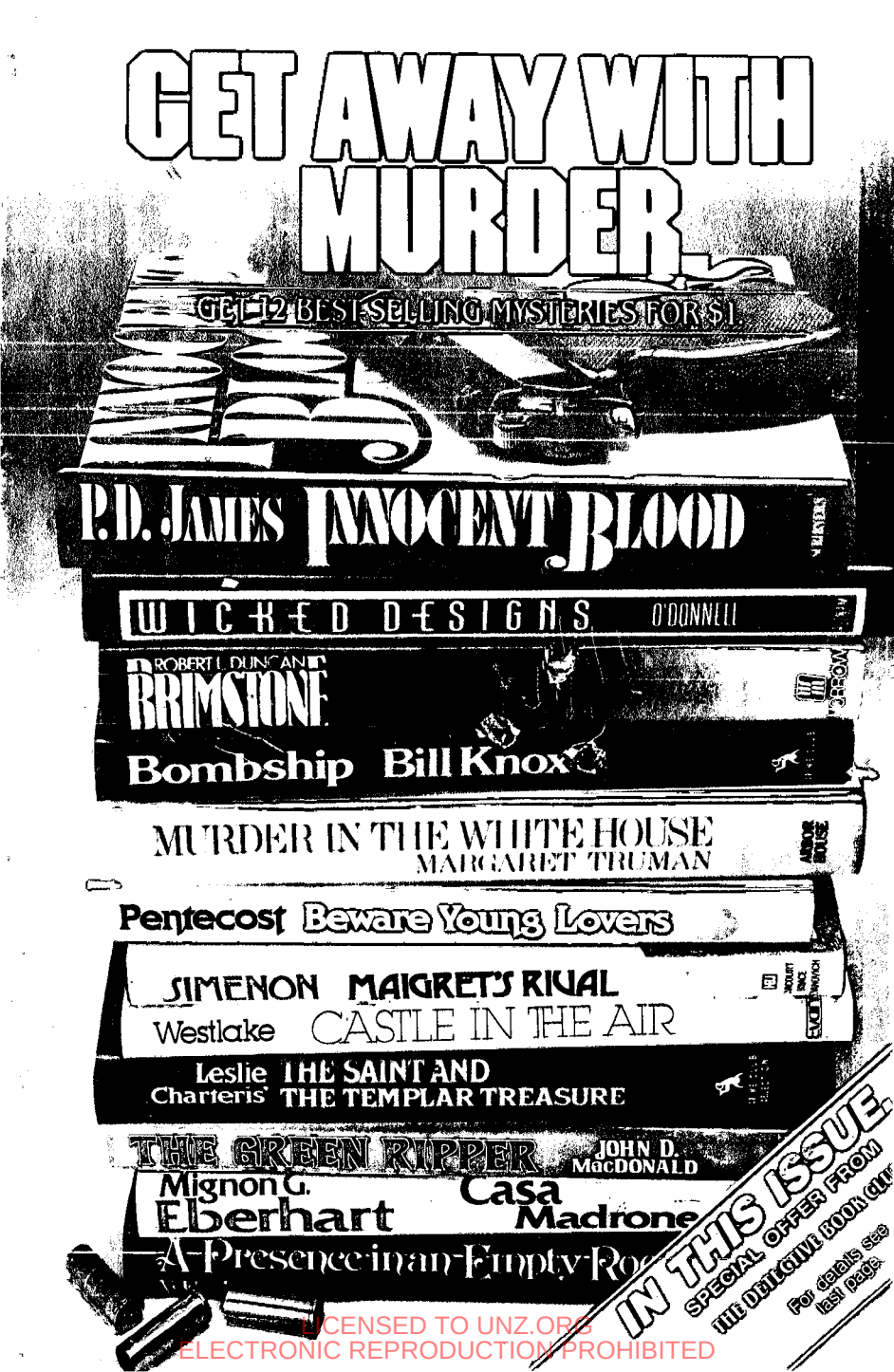

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